Creating Alignment with the Leadership Team Part 10

The last two newsletters in this series have been focused on the need to have an obsession for quality. This month we will discuss the importance of having a Learning Organization that is focused on capturing and developing the learning of the entire business enterprise.

LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Our organizations must be constantly learning and evolving in innovation and performance. We must consider all "solutions" and decisions to be temporary countermeasures until better solutions are found. We become a learning organization through relentless reflection and continuous improvement. We begin the process by creating stability within the business. Once a stable process has been established, one must identify inefficiencies and solve problems and design processes that require almost no inventory. As waste is exposed, we must have employees eliminate it. As teams are conducting improvement efforts, we must encourage our teams to use reflection both during and after a project to identify the shortcomings. If we do this correctly, the end result will be the development of countermeasures to avoid making the same mistakes again. Then we can institutionalize those learnings by standardizing the best practices.

WRONG FLOW OF PROBLEMS

Most managers cringe at the thought of exposing more problems within their organizations. This is with good reason since the old paradigm is that managers are to be the primary problem solvers. This thought process has created a situation in which 90% of the organization, we will call workers, delegate problem solving to 10% of the organization, we will call managers. This isn't sustainable based on the pure volume of work being created. Additionally, unfavorable issues arise when this thought process is carried out. Imagine a manager getting a problem from a worker, but subsequently that manager forgets to handle the issue. The worker then considers the possibility that not only was the problem not important to the manager, but the manager doesn't really care about him or her as a person. Assuming the manager didn't forget, the manager may attempt to give the worker a solution. In many cases that solution is flawed due to the manager's lack of understanding about the problem or the work wherein the problem lies. We all can agree that those with the most knowledge of the work are the ones who do that work each day. Oftentimes, the worker implements the manager's solution only to be met with a poor result, in which case some managers give the worker negative feedback. In the worker's mind,

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he is thinking, "I raised a problem, was given an ineffective solution, and got negative feedback." The worker then determines that surfacing problems isn't worth the hassle, so he decides to work around them. At this point all problem-solving collaboration has ended. The manager is thinking, "Everything is fine since I am not hearing problems from the floor. All is good, right?!?!" In this case no news is not good news. No news means his people have given up on him and don't see him as capable or willing to help them, so they have decided to create workarounds to get the job done. Those workarounds lead to product, service, and/or process variation that will eventually be noticed by our customers.
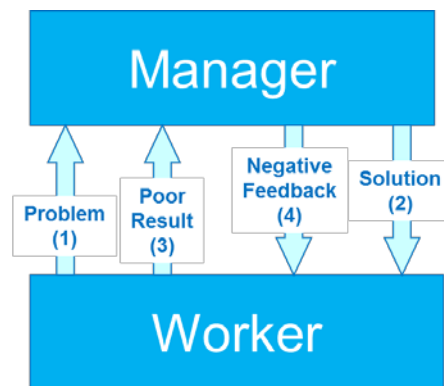

Figure 1: Wrong Flow of Problems

CORRECT FLOW OF PROBLEMS

The best approach to problem solving or process improvement in general is to put the people that do the work in charge of improving the work. In this new environment, the managers begin functioning as coaches and the workers become learners. In this approach, the coach, using Management by Walking Around and Visual Management, exposes problems and asks learners to propose a countermeasure. Allowing the coaches to facilitate this problem exposure process assumes the organization has trained the learners to use a specific process to solve problems. It isn't fair to ask learners to solve problems if they haven't been properly trained to find and eliminate the root causes of those problems. The learner makes a proposal using the standard format for the business. This allows the coach to coach and offer critique to the learner on the process and content of the proposal. This coaching is always Socratic (teaching by asking questions) to ensure the coach isn't giving the learner a solution. The learner takes the coaching and critique and continues with the process of solving the problem. This continues until the root cause of the problem has been found, a countermeasure has been implemented, and the effectiveness of that countermeasure has been verified.
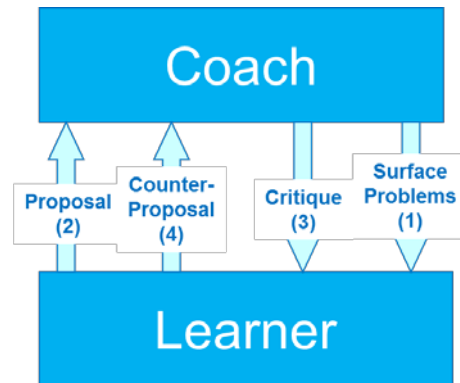
Figure 2: Right Flow of Problems

As the business matures, we can install a board to manage improvement, which we call "Managing Daily Improvement" (MDI) that essentially gives the power of problem exposure to the learners. This process is the frequent exposure of problems with a mechanism to capture problems that can eventually be driven to root cause since there aren't enough resources to expect the team to drive every hourly or takt miss to root cause. The hourly reaction is to simply restore flow for the next cycle. We also use a living histogram to capture the most frequent reasons for misses, and we prioritize the more highly recurring issues to drive to root cause using the Pareto principle.

GAINING ALIGNMENT

Many times, when it comes to solving problems, there are barriers to gaining alignment. Managers fear losing power/control. Managers got their positions by always having answers. If we haven't engaged the workers in problem solving before, the workers may fear responsibility. Workers have inadvertently, or in some extreme cases intentionally, been trained to believe their opinions don't matter. This doesn't mean that someone has actually told the workers their opinions don't matter. We send the message that we don't value a worker's opinion when we fail to include the workers from a specific area in the improvement process of said area. We like to say that we do improvement work WITH our people, not TO our people.

I am reminded of a workshop we conducted in Trenton, NJ. The workshop was focused on equipment improvement and building a sense of teamwork between operators, maintenance, and engineering. The event went very well with great participation and teamwork from all groups. During the end-of-event report out, we were asking the team to reflect on the event when one of the older gentlemen stood up. He looked at the top officer in the room and said, "I

have been working for this company for over thirty years, and this is the first time I have been included in an event like this. For thirty years, you have paid for my hands when you could have had my brain for free." The look on the top officer's face was priceless. It is hard to believe a company could have people in its employ who haven't been engaged for their entire career, but I assure you this happens frequently. We don't engage our workers, and we certainly don't ensure there is alignment and a deep understanding of the reasons behind the things we do.

Some of the root causes for this misalignment are:

- Management failing to define the business case (reason for action)
- Management failing to gain agreement on the current condition
- Management failing to understanding the current condition
- Workers delegating problems to Management
- Workers failing to provide solutions to problems in their areas
- Management failing to gain consensus that the problem is really a problem

The question we must ask ourselves is, "How many of these misalignments exist within our organization, and what are we doing to address them?"

NEXT STEPS

Is your organization one that is learning? How do you embed learning? What is the biggest learning gap in your organization? If you don't know the answers to these questions, Drive, Inc. can help. We have created a certification process to allow you to develop your entire organization in problem solving and problem solving coaching which uses a foundational methodology. Our clients have been averaging $11,000/person/year in validated savings with process operators who have been trained and coached while actively practicing problem solving. We have experienced professionals who can coach your team through the process of gaining alignment around this principle and teaching your organization how to leverage the problem-solving potential in your workers.   For a no-obligation introduction meeting, please contact Paul Eakle at paul.eakle@driveinc.com or 865-323-3491. Stay tuned for next month's newsletter when we will discuss the second part of this principle.