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Getting Change Started: A Look Inside the Conference Room

By Robert Tobin

About 30 managers from a Southeast Asian manufacturing plant owned by a global high-tech company are gathered in the room. The managers from Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, the U.S. and Australia represent all areas of the company's operations, including marketing, manufacturing, human resources, quality control, administration and customer relations.

Some wear the colorful shirts of the company's management training school. But more than corporate management is present. The company's suppliers and customers are also represented. Everyone here is eager to take a fresh look at how their organization can address some long standing problems and issues, and develop creative ways to work more closely with suppliers and meet the needs of customers.

The training director explains the reason for this latest seminar. We have had so many programs with fancy slogans and countless initiatives from the home and regional offices, but still the problems persist.

At the start of the program, participants are asked to switch their watches from one wrist to the other. Removing the watch is easy, but many people fumble around as they try to put their timepieces on a different hand. It's a small change, but even this one requires some effort and causes discomfort at first. On the first day of the training, people talk about making major changes at work. Amidst lots of nodding heads, people see that even small changes are tough in the beginning, take time to get used to, and sometimes require help to get through.

Midway through the morning, participants are asked to think back to when they were four years old. This is quite a shift in thinking, since everyone in the room is in their 40s and 50s. What do four-year-olds do? They ask a lot of "why" questions. The participants are then asked to apply the same inquisitiveness to situations in their company. Among the questions are:

Why do we keep making the same mistakes over and over?

Why does it matter if the product has a visual defect if it does not affect performance?

Why don't the people on the manufacturing floor see things from the customer's perspective?

Why do we still have so many defects even though our quality program is considered a big success?

Why doesn't top management walk the talk?

Why are our best engineers leaving us?

Why are we always reorganizing? It seems as if we just get used to one way of doing things, and it's changed again.

The group becomes very animated as everyone begins to think openly about some of the things they might otherwise be afraid to mention. The participants then pair up, with each person choosing one question they're most curious about and believe has the great potential to benefit the company.

Only one partner is allowed to talk, while the other just listens. The "talkers" repeat the questions and wonder out loud about the possible answers. The listeners have a tough job, since they cannot interrupt with advice.

The exercise allows the talkers to develop greater insight into the problems and some possible solutions.

The managers are in high spirits during the lunch break. Everyone enjoys being listened to and brainstorming. After lunch, it's time to go beyond wondering and focus on the real job at hand. The managers are asked to select one of the childlike "why" questions and turn it into a query that is more mature.

The question "Why do we still have defects?" becomes "How can we reduce defects?" "Why do the people on the floor not see the customer's perspective?" becomes "How can we get the people on the floor to see the perspective of the customer?".



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After groups of about eight are formed, some of the "how" questions are written on the top of the piece of newsprint. Each member of the group volunteer ideas as one group member writes them down. Anything goes in this modified brainstorming session, and it's like a dam bursting as people bring their collective energy to solving various problems that the company faces.

"How do we get people on the floor to see the customer's point of view?" prompted the following responses:

Make a videotape of what happens in the customer's plants when they receive defective products.

Invite people from the customer's sales staff to meet the production staff.

Let manufacturing people help with processing the paperwork for returned goods.

The participants end their first day of training filled with fresh ideas and a commitment from management to make sure that the suggestions are implemented. When they return for the second day of training, everyone is ready for action.