



## MANAGERS: INVOLVE WORKERS TO IMPROVE SYSTEM

**Memo: Quality at Work**

**Edition: Final**

The systems and processes of an organization are the major culprits of poor quality. To the people in charge, this is often disheartening. Their disappointment comes in knowing that most improvements must come from system changes that only they can make.

Every manager, at every level, should learn that the manager's primary job is to improve the system being managed. Every manager should understand that, when a system is not working properly, rarely are the workers at fault.

The workers work in the system. The managers work on the system with improvement ideas coming from those who work in the system. Improvement is unlikely if the people working on the system [the managers] routinely reject suggestions from the people working in the system [the front-line employees].

Managers working on the system will gain little by relying on exhortations and "worker motivation" tactics to solve system problems. Complaining about the problems of motivation and trying to remedy it with wage schemes will result in poorer quality, higher cost and decreased competitiveness.

The manager who consistently blames the workers for systems problem is advertising that he/she is in need of what I call a "managerial transformation."

In fact, if an organization constantly lays problems at the feet of workers, that may be evidence itself of system failure.

A simple question to ask before blaming the workers is: How much control do they have over the process ingredients? Namely, did they decide or have input on the methods, materials, equipment and the hiring of their co-workers?

I see the need for this transformation quite often as a result of my work in quality. Some managers are seemingly oblivious to the fact that if things are to get better they must be open to identifying and leading on systemic changes. They are obsessed with operating within the present system instead of identifying those things that need to be changed in order to make improvements. Most will agree that their quality can be improved. But, few dare to speak and act on the perils of the present system.

Enlightened or transformed managers recognize that change is inevitable and that they can be better leaders by welcoming input. A transformed manager aggressively pursues opportunities to improve the system.

The fact is that significant changes (improvements) cannot happen in the context of existing rules, policies and procedures. Why? Because they are set up to support the existing system. The saying that "new wine bursts old skin" is a good analogy when it comes to trying to create new paradigms with old thinking.



Nostalgia and fear seem to be the main inhibitors when it comes to leading on systemic changes. Managers get caught up reminiscing about what has always been. Given their own success, in their own minds the system is not broken. Quite often they are wrong.

Fear manifests itself in many forms when it comes to leading on changes in systems. Career wise, it could be disastrous to identify and seek to change systems that are benefiting a select group of executives and managers.

Nostalgia and fear are dealt with when the leadership is transformed to believe and accept the need to improve the system and its processes. Ideally management's primary focus will be improving the system so that workers can better serve the customer.

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