

# **Initiative and Improvement in Your Organization**

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Over the past six months, I've performed health assessments in a variety of organizations. The leaders who asked me to conduct this intervention realize that their organizations are not making the progress that is possible. If their organizations were characterized by extensive initiative and improvement, they'd be handling many new opportunities.

It's not every day that organizations have an outsider come in and talk with team members about the quality of their leaders, about how reliable their operations are, and about how they might improve their culture, relationships, and results.

Though I ask about what is working well, human nature tends to cause team members to focus on the things that could be better. After a day of interviews, I am often surprised at two things.

First, there is usually a nagging problem or two that several people identify. These situations often affect many people and reduce productivity, quality, or reliability. The conditions seem to have been tolerated for quite some time.

Second, team members tell me about situations within their areas of responsibility that could be improved, but are also being tolerated. Often, the individual has every right and authority to tackle this problem and eliminate it, yet no initiative has been taken.

I remember reading in *Succeeding with Change*, Tony Eccles' 1994 book, that Toyota team members submitted two million suggestions in one year, and that 85% of them were adopted! Wow, that's encouraging!

So why do your team members tolerate problems that frustrate many folks? Further, why do they endure less-than-desirable situations in their particular areas of responsibility?

The puzzling thing to me is that when I dig deeper into these situations, they can usually identify specific steps that they can take! So why haven't they done so already?

Most organizations have ingrained ways of doing things. Everyone involved takes the existing methods for granted. These practices often become unconsciously established as boundaries in the minds of the workers.

Innovations require an ability to see beyond the existing circumstances. The simple act of me asking questions about the situation stimulates creative thinking about improvement options. It's not unusual for improvement to start happening before I ever deliver my findings!

Though it seems that the individual should have the power to make improvements, it has not been obvious to the individual. Sometimes the culture does not emphasize looking for improvement opportunities. Sometimes entrepreneurial thinking and taking initiative have not been encouraged.

In your business, are you willing to invite workers to think, "What would I do if this were my business?" Are you willing to collaborate with the workers in a new, exploratory way, to provide the resources they need to innovate?

I conduct organizational health assessments where leaders want improvement. However, leaders have the ability to build initiative and improvement into their organization before I ever show up!

Successful leaders create an environment where others excel in using their talents, experience, and skills. If you are not already there, imagine yourself in the position of an outside observer.

Take a fresh look at your operations and the relationships between the managers and those who do the work. Ask what would be required to inspire initiative and improved thinking about what is so familiar and accepted to everyone working there.

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***Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach, helping you build organizations of excellence and future leaders. Contact Dennis at [dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com](mailto:dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com) or 770-286-2250.***