

Systematizing and Personalizing

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2007, published in the Houston Daily Journal on Saturday, April 28, 2007

Have you ever been treated like you were an animal, just one undifferentiated member of a herd? Did it feel like nobody cared about you personally?

I remember ROTC summer camp between my junior and senior year in college. The first day at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, hundreds of military students were obtaining their physical exams. It was line after line of “hurry up and wait!” As we were moved from one exam station to another, some of us actually started mooing (softly of course--we didn't want to get into trouble on our first day!)

Organizations generate systems for accomplishing their real work. In fact, the most effective organizations have reliable systems that have been honed to provide known desirable outcomes.

Once all the waste and duplicate work has been designed out of the system, then the emphasis is on repeating that methodology every time, exactly the same way. If the input is held constant, and the process is executed exactly the same every time, then the outcome is predictable and can be expected to yield the requirements of the finished product or service.

But sometimes, like I experienced in my introduction to the military, the process can be very dehumanizing. Each officer candidate in that line was forming initial impressions of how the Army takes care of its own, and the impressions were unfavorable. An occasional “Good morning, cadet!” or a “We hope you learn a lot here this summer” would have made the experience a bit more welcoming.

Every organization has many systems for accomplishing its real work. There are the primary systems that form the core of the business. It may be a manufacturing process, such as roasting and grinding peanuts, mixing the paste with sugar and other minor ingredients, then filling plastic jars that are packed in cardboard boxes for shipping to grocery shelves. Or it may be a support system such as generating an invoice for shipping those pallets of peanut butter to Kroger.

Every process, however, involves real human beings doing that work. And sometimes, leaders forget that those individuals are not just extensions of the machinery. When the pressure is on to make the established quota of peanut butter for the day, it's easy to overlook that every employee is unique and worthy of personal attention.

Not only do the best organizations create reliable, repeatable systems, they personalize interactions with the people who do the work. They know that with every pair of hands and with every strong back comes a creative brain at no additional charge. And engaging that brain requires only a few open-ended questions.

We humans have a tendency to compartmentalize. Once we identify separate categories, we make choices. Leaders sometimes ask, “Do you want me to focus on the unique needs of each individual? Or do you want me to design a smooth, efficient system?”

The best organizations find a way to link those two concepts with the conjunction “and.” They do both.

They systematize and they personalize. They put energy against improving each, believing one does not have to suffer to enable the other to excel.

Are you interested in moving your organization toward genuine excellence? Utilize the strengths and seek the interests of every employee. Enhance their skills. Engage each individual in improving the effectiveness of his or her “real work” systems.

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