

Organizational Assessments

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For the past two weeks, this column has been an overview of how an outside pair of eyes might conduct a health assessment for an existing organization. Today, I'd like to point out some positive effects that such an intervention generates.

Curiosity and energy are released among the employees. It's not every day that the leaders of an organization direct employees to cooperate with outsiders who ask questions about how the place functions. From the initial questions, people start thinking about potential improvements, and they start embracing new possibilities.

New awareness occurs as people start thinking about their daily activities in a new way. For a brief period, they are no longer working "in" their systems. They become immensely aware that there are procedures and methods that they follow on a daily basis—some of them may be ineffective. As they examine why they do what they do, they realize that many of their systems were never consciously designed, they just happened. The outsiders' questions cause them to start working "on" their systems, creatively considering how they might be improved.

Resourcefulness and wisdom emerge. On a daily, repetitive basis, there is no stimulus to encourage workers to think in new ways about what they do. Now their leaders have legitimized them offering ideas for improvement. A trained pair of ears genuinely listens to what they have to say. After some initial doubt about how honest they can be, most people open up and share insights and perceptions that their bosses have no way of knowing. No one understands potential improvements in an operation like the person who performs that function every day!

The concept of service develops new meaning. When we ask individuals to describe how their customers see this company relative to their competitors, employees begin to think like customers. They become more aware of their customers' needs. They imagine how their customers might feel when they do some comparative shopping. They take the customer less for granted, realizing the customer has a choice!

Optimism over "what could be" causes renewed commitment. Whether the organization is in terrible shape or is extremely healthy, the evaluation generates hope for what might be possible in the future. Whatever the current situation, employees are able to imagine options for improving.

Collaboration grows. The consultants usually share the assessment results with teams of employees. Teams prioritize needs, then generate and evaluate options. Existing teams and specially formed teams execute their selected activities. Teams are able to accomplish much more than individuals working separately.

When organizational assessments are conducted properly, cooperation and commitment improve quickly. This phenomenon is known as "the Hawthorne effect", named for behavioral research conducted in the late 1920's at the Western Electric plant in Hawthorne, Illinois.

The objective of the study was to find ways to improve productivity. One experiment raised the level of lighting in a portion of the facility. Productivity improved. The conclusion: increased lighting helps the workers do their job.

Rather than simply accept this inference at face value, one investigator decided to repeat the study with decreased lighting. Productivity increased even more!

Struggling to understand what was happening, researchers finally concluded that explicit interventions (like an organizational assessment) cause participants to respond favorably to the increased attention by their managers and/or the researchers.

Beyond the Hawthorne effect, however, I've seen huge improvements in quality, safety, productivity, reliability, etc. Why? Employees genuinely become engaged in executing procedures they have identified and consciously chosen. It works!