

# My way, your way... our way

by Janice Galnan



## Technology and change are all about people

**W**HEN TOP-NOTCH TECHNICAL programs function at less than maximum capacity, somewhere in the system managers have lost sight of the value of natural inquisitiveness, synergistic thinking and meaningful dialogue with their teams. When decisions regarding technology are made in the absence of employee input, buy-in and commitment for new technology becomes difficult. Without exception, buy-in is ensured by first improving human relationships.

### From the top looking down

Managers in manufacturing, government and service industries believe that team building and improved communication between themselves and employees is important for quality, but managers themselves often have faulty beliefs. Consider the following comments by managers and the concerns raised by these statements:

- “We train managers and senior people to help them with change and then cascade leadership techniques and quality processes downward.” **Concern:** Top down leadership is less effective; front-line workers who must implement change must also be involved in major decisions. A collective and broad-based mindset is essential.
- “Front-line employees who resist change are the real source of problems.” **Concern:** This indicates a belief system that lacks introspection. Employees simply react to decisions that are made at higher levels when these decisions fail to address how their work gets done.
- “We (managers) know what’s needed. We’re doing everything we can.” **Concern:** Managers who believe they have the answers are unable to hear employee’s ideas. Believing the needs of employees are met, they fail to ask for ideas. Communication and dialogue shuts

down creating a major impediment to quality, growth and change.

These three statements reflect a management belief that problems should be handled by leaders/managers, and that problems are caused by employees, not by managers. The second is rarely the case. Employees and managers need to jointly build a vision and execute it. In each of the situations above managers could benefit by including the ideas of their people. Now consider the following perspectives.

### From the bottom looking up

When asked about management’s approach to change, employees from manufacturing, government and service industries indicate different perceptions and beliefs than their managers:

- Decisions are still made at the top. We aren’t asked to contribute.
- Rather than invite input, managers give us directions.
- Managers think they have right answers, so they don’t hear our ideas.
- They want us to change and yet they keep doing the same old things.

**Concern:** These comments indicate that employees don’t feel ‘heard.’ Methods of cascading change and responsibility downward are seen by employees to be another variation of top-down authority that leaves employees out of the loop. The bottom line for employees is this: “If management doesn’t care enough to ask our opinion, why should we care enough to support their decisions? We are the ones that really know what’s needed and how things work best. Why are we excluded?” Perception and belief between managers and employees is out of alignment. A different way of thinking needs to emerge.

Managers who excel at team building often think ‘out-of-the-box.’ To remove the ‘other’ as the source of problems, both managers and team members need to see how

they each individually contribute to a situation; however, it is the manager who starts the change process. Here are some thoughts about how:

1. **Learn how you, the manager, is seen to contribute to problems.** When you automatically ‘know what to do’ with a people problem, you are closed to new ideas. Rather, ask your team directly and in the presence of each other about their perceptions of what’s needed. Let them know you don’t have all the answers – and they don’t have to know all the answers either. Approach situations together. When you stop ‘having the answer,’ new ideas appear.
2. **Let go of ‘one right way’ thinking.** Technical problems elicit a team of experts for repairs thus ensuring quality, productivity and timely deliveries. A similar response doesn’t exist for a team experiencing low morale, apathy and fear – the very people who impact quality, production and delivery times. If interpersonal problems exist in your organization, look closely at management beliefs. How teams are managed is a direct result of how managers think about the soft side of management.
3. **Use outside specialists to improve communication.** Research suggests that technical experts are more concerned with their projects than with good communication. Yet poor communication means low commitment during implementation and puts technical projects at risk. Improving communication is minimal in cost compared to technical repairs. Hire a professional skilled in human interaction who understands how communication breaks down. He or she will help you hear early team frustration and anger that will have an impact on the project.
4. **Change professional titles to be fun, friendly and functional.** Words come

to have associations and put distance between people making them hesitate to speak openly about ideas and needs. Change the language to reflect words such as “associates” or “colleagues.” Ask team members about informal titles that they would prefer.

- 5. Be quiet when employees or colleagues are asked for ideas.** Draw information from all employees and be prepared to mine for expert knowledge. Avoid interrupting and defensive comments such as “Yes but, there’s a reason for that.” Consider employee comments for a few days. Thank them directly for ideas – let them know your plans for their ideas. Act on their ideas.

### **Managers change, results appear**

Leaders and managers become more aware of their own assumptions and how these contribute to poor business decisions. They let go of having to have the answers in favor of listening to find the answer. When a manager becomes more authentic and open with the team, everyone will talk more openly with each other about how to make improvements. Communication on their team improves. Quality improves.

Leaders and managers examine the nature of the real problems and listen more effectively to their team.

Leaders and managers push past their own resistance about change and hand over the power to act to those who ultimately implement decisions. Continued out-of-the-box thinking, and searching for creative techniques that help management listen more effectively to the team, can lead to meaningful and sustainable change.

### **A final thought**

The great quality pioneer, W. Edwards Deming, spent 30 years helping to rebuild the Japanese economy. In the process he noted that “systems are blind to themselves.” Even when senior leaders are committed to change, the years of embedded cultural practices leave employees cautious and resistant to follow. To minimize resistance and to avoid repeating mistakes when bringing about meaningful change, he reminded North American managers to use a combination of internal and external experts, to take time to change a system and to start with themselves. Change requires shifts in thinking at every level

and constant reinforcement on the part of the leader. Develop leadership thinking at all levels, and above all else, value your people. Without them there is no organization. ❧❧

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*Janice Calnan is the author of SHIFT: Secrets of Positive Change for Organizations and Their Leaders published by Creative Bound Inc. ([www.creativebound.com](http://www.creativebound.com)), providers of on-demand access to authors and speaking professionals who are experts in a wide range of life and workplace issues.*