

Mission Ready

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The Importance of Knowing "Why"

How many times have we seen - in movies and on television - variations of the following scenario? A new CEO, often from another industry, is brought into a company and immediately begins to initiate broad, sweeping changes. The new paradigm is: "Out with the Old, in with the New." Admirers look upon the new CEO as a breath of fresh air. Those who resist the change are characterized as stodgy members of the "old school," and are soon transitioned out of the organization for their inability to keep pace.

Does that plot sound familiar? Do you think the organization in our little scene would prosper under such bold new management? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Let's take a look at a highly successful organization that is still going strong after nearly 225 years - the United States Marine Corps. New "CEOs" (Commandants) of this organization do not sweep away the old and bring in the new with every change of command. They know full well the reasons behind the policy they perpetuate. That's because, from Day One of their officer training, Marine Corps leaders are encouraged to ask "Why?" Contrary to the Hollywood stereotype, the Marine Corps does not want its officers to "go by the book" without knowing why. After all, "the book" incorporates many lessons learned the hard way, often at the expense of the very lives of brave Marines.

In Marine officer training, much reference is made to "the monkey experiment." A

few years ago, scientists placed six monkeys in a cage, with bananas suspended above. The monkeys, of course, thought they were in monkey-heaven and scrambled up the cage to get to the bananas - at which time they were showered with cold water. Monkeys, like cats, hate cold water; they learned immediately to leave those bananas alone. Then, one of the original monkeys was replaced by a new monkey, who of course saw the bananas and tried to scramble up the bars - but was restrained by the other monkeys in the cage. Soon the newcomer learned that the bananas were taboo.

One by one the original monkeys were replaced by new monkeys, who all learned from the other monkeys to leave the bananas alone. Eventually, there were six replacement monkeys in the cage, all of whom obeyed the tribal law. The training has been successful; the monkeys never went for the bananas. But none of them knew why. None of them had felt the cold-water shower for themselves.

It is important that all of your employees [you thought we were going to say "monkeys," didn't you?] know the sound reasons behind company policy. If your employees - and, God forbid, your company's leaders - do not know the reasons "why," they will be tempted to arbitrarily change it. And those who change "the old" policy without investigating the reasons behind it, are doomed to learn those lessons all over again, "the hard way."