

Mission Ready

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Do Your Employees know the “WHY” of Company Policy?

Often company policy is considered an obstacle to getting things done. We are told by business consultants on television that employees who “do it by the book” lack imagination and drive. We are exhorted, rather, to “think out of the box” in order to come up with the innovative solutions required to meet today’s complex challenges. After all, these experts continue, those who originally formulated the company policy of many blue chip corporations came from previous generations; how could they possibly have anticipated the dynamic issues of the modern business environment? So, sooner or later, the inevitable happens: a “forward thinking” company associate makes an end run around corporate policy, in an effort to move quickly and decisively, and ends up creating the unhappy conditions the policy was implemented to prevent in the first place. Instead of being rewarded, he/she is reprimanded, or worse.

Of course, we are all better served if our people adhere to company policy. But, how many of them know the real reasons behind this policy?

One would think that, of all the organizations which demand doing things “by the book,” the United States Marine Corps would certainly be in the Top Ten. But, actually, the Corps wants its Marines to know the “Why” of Marine Corps policy, so that they are less tempted to reinvent the wheel in times of emergency. In fact, Marine officer candidates are encouraged to ask “why?” throughout their training. The veteran instructors will remind them to remember the “monkey experiment.”

This famous experiment is instructive to all of us in the business community.

Years ago, a group of scientists put a number of monkeys in a cage with bananas hanging from the top bars. The monkeys, naturally enough, thought they were in monkey-heaven, and scrambled to the top. The moment they touched the bananas, they were showered with cold water from overhead sprinkler heads. Monkeys, like cats, hate cold water. It didn’t take long for the lesson to be learned: leave the bananas alone.

Then, scientists would replace one of the monkeys with a new monkey, who would immediately scramble towards the top of the cage for the bananas. The new monkey would actually be restrained by his fellows before he could reach the treats. Soon, he too learned the lesson of the tribe.

One by one the original monkeys were replaced with newcomers, who all learned to avoid the bananas. Before long, the entire cage was populated with new monkeys—none of whom ever reached for the bananas, and none of whom ever knew WHY. Not ever having experienced the cold water, themselves, they never knew the reasons behind the social injunction.

Today’s Marine instructors warn the incoming officers not to become like those monkeys, and obey Marine Corps policy simply because those are the rules. Soon the officer candidates begin to appreciate that there are sound reasons for doing things by the book, and that lives have been lost learning these lessons the hard way.

As managers, we, too, must ensure that our personnel know the profound reasons behind company policy; obedience isn’t enough. A company policy that is not appreciated by the employees will be disobeyed sooner or later.