TITLE: "THE NEED FOR CRITICAL THINKING"

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Since 1971: *"Software for the finest computer - the Mind"*

"I have never encountered a technical problem that couldn't be conquered with a little imagination, some concentrated effort, and a lot of good old-fashioned management."
- Bryce's Law

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago I was managing a "crunch time" project involving a staff of eight programmers. The system design was well documented and very thorough (of course, we used "PRIDE"). Nonetheless, I found it important to start the day with a brief meeting where each person reviewed their progress and what kind of technical problems and interferences they were facing. From this, I developed a punchlist of action items to be resolved, and took the necessary steps to solve them. The meetings started at 8:00am and took no more than 30 minutes. It was brief, to the point and a good way to wake the staff up and put them to work for the day. It also allowed the staff to speak their minds, brainstorm, and share ideas. From this, they developed an esprit de corps and conquered a mammoth project on time. As the manager, I also saw it as a convenient vehicle to release stress and put the programmers in the proper frame of mind.

This story runs contrary to today's Theory X world of management where the opinions and ideas of subordinates are considered inconsequential. As for me, I saw it as a vital means to get everyone on the same wave length and solicit their support. What I learned from this experience was that if you are going to empower people, you must let them speak.

As an aside, even though this was a "state of the art" project involving new technology, we found there was no technical problem we could not overcome simply by putting the problem on the table and discussing it in a rational manner. Please keep in mind that I hardly consider myself a technical guru and, instead, allowed the staff to think aloud and explore alternatives. But such openness in today's corporate world is the exception as opposed to the rule. Many managers feel threatened by allowing their subordinates to think and, as such, suppress such discourse. Inevitably, this results in considerable frustration by employees who feel restrained by management.

PURPOSE

Aside from a means to release pressure, open critical thinking in the workplace provides several benefits:

1. Fertility of Mind - Due to the repetition of the workplace, workers often fall victim to complacency. By forcing them to perform mental gymnastics, they must stay sharp and on top of their game. Open discourse actually becomes challenging and results in friendly competitive debate.

2. Commitment - By creating a think tank environment, the employee realizes their voice is heard by management and, consequently, enhances their commitment to the company and the project. It also helps to thwart apathy and promotes participation. As an employee is allowed to speak more, they develop a sense of ownership of a project and a greater pride in workmanship. As such, it has a positive effect on staff morale.

3. Teamwork - Open communications promotes teamwork by forcing people to realize they are working towards common goals and raises awareness of their dependencies on each other.

4. Problem Identification - In terms of problems, nobody likes surprises. The sooner a problem can be identified, the sooner it can be addressed and solved. Establishing a punchlist of problems allows a manager to preemptively strike a problem before it festers and worsens. Get the problems on the table as soon as possible and chart a course of action to solve them.

5. Communications - An open dialog provides a manager with the means to dispel rumors and misconceptions and keep the staff on track. Open discourse also allows the manager to easily spot a disgruntled employee.

Permitting critical thinking in the work place is a wise investment in your staff and provides for their continuing education. However, if you do not care what they think, you won't be permitting such debate. But then again, the staff will be talking regardless if you grant them permis-

sion or not. Then why not channel this discourse and turn something negative into something positive?

IMPLEMENTATION

Establishing the proper forum for the exchange of ideas is important. Although there is a tendency today to implement such a forum through Internet Discussion Groups and Blogs, there is nothing better than face-to-face discussions. And because of the varied egos, interests, knowledge and levels of experience involved, it is necessary to establish certain operating rules regardless of the selected venue. Here are some suggestions:

- Keep the discussions positive and constructive. As Winston Churchill said, *"Any idiot can see what's wrong with something, but can you see what's right?"* Do not open Pandora's Box by allowing this to turn into a general bitch session. Further, a professional decorum should be observed. Do not allow personalities and politics to creep into the discussion. Members should respect all opinions, regardless who gives them. Because of this...

- The discussion must be moderated by someone who will fairly and honestly control the discourse. The one thing you want to avoid here though is full censorship which tends to alienate people. Be forceful in respecting the rules of discussion, but do not censor a person simply because you do not agree with him.

- Welcome all ideas, regardless if they are unorthodox or a bit avant-garde. Further, all ideas should be permitted without fear of ridicule or retribution. In other words, you do not want to inhibit participation. Even if someone is in the minority, allow them to take an opposing position but insist they adequately defend it (this inevitably results in some of the most stimulating debate of all).

- All persons must be identified, no anonymous feedback (this is particularly needed for blogs and discussion groups). You are looking for the participants to take a responsible role in the discussions.

- What is said here, stays here. This is a think tank for your group only. Their comments may be misunderstood by others. As such, privacy is critical.

Finally, if problems are identified and not addressed with no apparent reason, problems will inevitably ensue. If no action is taken based on the their input, the staff will quickly realize that this is nothing more than a colossal waste of time.

CONCLUSION

I learned early in my business career that you get things done through people; that a single person cannot do everything. As such, it is necessary to respect the human spirit and allow it to flourish. I also learned that we enjoy life through the help and society of others. I have not yet met that person on this earth who knows everything and, as such, it is vital to exchange ideas, form consensus opinion, and evolve. By allowing employees to discuss pertinent issues, we promote communications and teamwork, establish trust, and conquer the pressing problems of the day. But to make this all happen, critical thinking must be channeled in a structured and positive way.

END

About the Author

Tim Bryce is the Managing Director of M. Bryce & Associates (MBA) of Palm Harbor, Florida and has 30 years of experience in the field of Information Resource Management (IRM). He is available for training and consulting on an international basis.

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