

■ MID-IOWA BUSINESS

How management can benefit from a fresh pair of eyes

Over the course of my career, I've made a somewhat sad, but certainly not surprising observation: Those most adamant there is nothing to be gained from an outside opinion are typically the people who need it the most.

Recently, I was facilitating a process improvement event. One of the participants had obviously been "strongly encouraged" to attend. He stewed in his seat with his arms tightly crossed.



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Very early into our three-day agenda, he proudly proclaimed he had been performing the task under review for 25 years and he saw no value wasting time on an already-optimized process.

I quickly glanced at my watch. "Only 20 minutes into Day 1; that's a new personal record for initial verbal resistance," I marveled to myself. "There's likely to be more opportunity here than I initially thought."

I assured Mr. Adamant his feelings were not uncommon and asked him to trust the improvement process we were about to embark upon, explaining it had proven itself effective time and time again.

Sure enough, less than two hours later (another personal record), the team had identified a major process improvement and was implementing its breakthrough. Over the course of the next three days, several other improvements would be identified, tested, modified, implemented and finally documented into Standard Work.

To his credit, at the end of the three days, Mr. Adamant shook my hand and thanked me for the help.

As a former general manager used to regularly remind me and my colleagues on his staff, "We don't know what we don't know."

This was his way of encouraging us to continually explore outside of our comfort zone.

Indeed, savvy leaders understand this and make conscious efforts to introduce themselves to new people, fresh situations and innovative ideas that help them illuminate their organization's blind spots.

There are many ways to go about obtaining these "fresh eyes."

Perhaps the most important is to ensure that the senior management staff doesn't become overweighted with members who have grown up in the organization. While it's nice to promote from within, it's critical that top management contain a balance of capable members with a different set of experiences. The current and desired ratio of company veterans to newcomers should be considered whenever filling a management opening.

For smaller organizations, or those that do not frequently experience management turnover, a trusted consultant or advisor can provide an invaluable perspective. A consultant's constant exposure to other organizations (both within and outside of your industry) as well as their ability to rise above the trees and assess the forest can complement your detailed understanding of your business.

Benchmarking is another means for obtaining an outsider's perspective. This is most valuable when a specific weakness is identified, and an organization is visited that excels in the targeted weakness. A game plan for the visit should be predetermined with expectations that those visiting will be accountable for identifying and implementing an improvement plan.

Reciprocal tours with area businesses also can be helpful. In order to be meaningful, ground rules should be established that make it not only acceptable but expected that participants provide tour hosts with insightful, honest and critical feedback rather than "happy talk."

Finally, any method of learning broadens an understanding of the organization. Formal classes, books, magazine articles, seminars, webinars ... the list goes on and on.

The aforementioned strategies are means for nurturing a learning organization, one that welcomes rather than resists new ideas and opportunities.

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