

## Article 17 – Why?

You've got a problem – quality is down or perhaps sales are up and you can't supply. You call a meeting and for the next half hour the conversation is peppered with phrases like –“I think that .....” “ Well, my guess is .....” “The last time this happened.....” “John was telling me yesterday .....”

It's frustrating isn't it? And the end result? At best, you end up treating the symptoms; at worst, you end up doing nothing at all.

Who hasn't seen the film “Apollo 13” – if not in a cinema, then surely on television? In terms of repeats, it's pushing “The Great Escape” and “Bullit” pretty hard. Me – I watch it every time it's shown because I find the problem solving fascinating. I love it when Flight Director Gene Krantz says to his crisis management team – “Let's work the problem”.

A headhunter once told me that management was “merely applied common sense”. My response was that if that was the case it was surprising how rare common sense was and how few people appeared capable of applying it. “Working a problem” would seem common sense as well but everyone wants to rush straight to a solution. Analysis and fact-finding to understand the cause of the problem take time and are not as glamorous as conjuring up a solution out of thin air. As my first boss used to say – “Don't confuse me with facts, I've already made up my mind”.

There are lots of problem solving techniques around from herringbone diagrams and mind mapping to flow charts and force field analysis. Most work better with some problems than with others; some require considerable expertise to facilitate and others are so complicated to apply that most of the time is spent pawing over the “instruction manual”.

I am just going to focus on one because it's incredibly simple to apply and helps everyone avoid the trap of treating the symptoms not the cause. It's the Toyota Why technique, developed by Taiichi Ohno, the pioneer of Just-in-Time.

He instituted a policy whereby all Toyota management, in analysing a problem, were told to ask the question – why? – at least five times in order to uncover the root cause of a particular problem.

So if we apply this technique to the problem of keeping up with demand, the questioning might go something like this.

**Q:** *Why can't we keep up with demand?*

**A:** Our stocks are down and we are having difficulty increasing our production.

**Q:** *What sort of difficulties?*

**A:** In theory we should have sufficient capacity but there seems to be a bottleneck in final assembly.

**Q:** *Why is there a bottleneck?*

**A:** One of the lines keeps breaking down

**Q:** *Why?*

**A:** Because we cut back on the maintenance budget last year when sales were down and there are some items on that line that need replacing

**Q:** *So why don't we replace them?*

**A:** Because we cut back on maintenance staff as well.

**Q:** *Why don't we hire a contractor to do the work?*

As Gene Krantz said "work the problem". Uncover the facts and you will find the cause.

Of course, you still have to come up with solutions that you will then need to evaluate before deciding on the best option to implement.

But a problem well defined is half solved.

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