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Getting past “we’ve always done it that way”

A frontline team helped a 100-year-old furniture manufacturer overcome its quality issues—and an ingrained aversion to change.

Here's a classic change-management challenge: "We've always done it that way here." Almost all companies and other private and public institutions seeking to change their direction are faced with this organizational reflex at one time or another. The cost of inertia is high. An organization's only chance for lasting success in today's rapidly changing environment is to be nimble and flexible. Unless it is able to respond to change, an organization could easily be left behind.

What can companies and other institutions do to overcome an aversion to change? One successful approach relies on frontline employees as instruments of change. A frontline team is most likely to have the best grasp of a problem facing a company. The following case study, adapted from a real-world example, shows how a frontline team—given the opportunity to look at a situation with fresh eyes—addressed a costly throughput and quality-control issue.

The challenge

A century-old furniture manufacturer was expanding into retailing. To succeed, its executives concluded that the company had to reduce the time from a customer's order to delivery of that order to the

customer's home. The industry standard was 12 to 14 weeks. They wanted to cut that time to 4 to 7 weeks. The executives assembled a frontline team to try to figure out how to accelerate the process, and it was given 30 days to do so. The team comprised two plant engineers, a saw operator, an assembler, and a representative from the finishing room, all experts in their specific areas. The company, which operated in a traditional top-down management style, had never approached problem solving in this way. Team members were encouraged to look at the assembly process as if they were seeing it for the first time.

Not long into its work, the team recognized that resolution of the time-to-delivery problem would have to wait. Team members had uncovered a more urgent issue—quality control.

At the start of their project, team members walked along the assembly line and noticed a piece of red tape on most of the furniture being built. They had never paid much attention to this feature in the past. A company senior vice president explained what the tape meant: "Any furniture piece with red tape needs a bit of touch-up, which causes it to be removed from the production line at one of our inspection stations, placed in what we call the cull hold, and fixed. Then it gets returned to production."

Since nearly every item of furniture the team members saw had a piece of red tape, they wondered if the assembly line was having a particularly bad day. "No, it's typical," the senior vice president said.

And the team knew the reason for the red tape wasn't because this was a new product. "We've been making this one for more than 50 years; this is one of our staples," the executive confirmed.

"So why is there so much red tape?" the team asked. "I've never noticed it until you pointed it out," the senior vice president said. "I don't know."

The insight

Production yield at final quality inspection was 86%, the senior vice president estimated. This calculation seemed quite high to the team, considering that more than 14% of the furniture appeared to have a piece of red tape. So the team decided to conduct an experiment. The assembly line had three inspection stations. The team had inspectors at the first station stay on the line, but inspectors at the intermediary stations were asked to take a break; in this way, no furniture pieces would be taken from the assembly line for repairs as the furniture made its way to final quality assurance.

What the team found astounded it and the rest of the company. The team counted 123 pieces during this experiment. No piece was taken off the line for touch-up and then put back into production. Every item that reached the end of the line had a piece of red tape—meaning the true first-pass inspection rate was zero. By employing three different inspection stations, and thus sub-sequent repairs and touch-ups before reaching final quality inspection, the company had hidden from itself the extent of its quality and throughput issues.

The result

The team now understood that, before attacking furniture cycle time, it needed to improve first-pass quality. Team members called themselves the Red

Tape Busters and set a goal of 100% first-pass yield. It analyzed all the defects that were being caught by the initial inspection team. This kind of assessment hadn't been done before; analysis normally occurred only after final inspection. The team identified 12 categories of defects.

One issue was dents in wood panels. Team members observed that the panels were stacked horizontally when transported through the factory for further processing. As many as 40 panels laid on top of each other, and these were carried over years-old concrete floors by carts equipped with wooden wheels. The team concluded that the divots in the wood were created by small pieces of sawdust under the pressure of the weighty panels and bouncing carts. When an inspector noticed these imperfections in a piece of furniture, he or she would pull it off the line. The team's solution proved surprisingly straightforward and inexpensive: transport the panels vertically in a retrofitted cart. The change eliminated 100% of the divots.

However, the most dramatic recommendation the team made involved the reorganization of the assembly line itself. The conveyor belt that moved the furniture was set to a certain number of pieces per hour. As it turns out, the rate that management selected didn't necessarily match the workers' ability to assemble the product and, in fact, often outpaced it. The result was that workers would get behind and have to remove piece after piece from the line, leading to tons of material stacked nearby on the factory floor. These pieces would be worked on

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during breaks and after hours. In the meantime, the pieces of wood piled upon the floor were subject to damage.

Noting the problem, the team proposed to management that it switch from a “push” to a “pull,” or worker-paced, system. The suggestion to employ a technique from the lean operations playbook at first did not go down well with executives. The collective objection was, “You can never allow workers to pace the line. That’s not an option. It’s never been done that way in 100 years, and it’s certainly not going to be done on my watch.”

However, the team members didn’t take no for an answer. With the implicit approval of other managers, they found an empty warehouse and, over a weekend, built an experimental “pull” line with spare equipment from the factory. They operated it for a few weeks and found that such a worker-paced system could lead to a shorter assembly line, more transparency about production bottlenecks, and a reduced number of furniture defects. The result of the pilot was so persuasive that company managers changed their minds and, not long thereafter, incorporated the “pull” system into the production process.

By the end of the 30 days, team members had identified dozens of production issues and had proposed fixes for most of them. After the changes were made, first-pass yield reached 96%, and furniture moved through the factory faster, leading to a 90% improvement in productivity and large capital savings through shrunken work-in-progress inventory. As a side benefit, it was a first big step in cutting the amount of time it took for furniture to get to the consumer. And all the solutions were generated by the front line, underscoring the power that positive mind-set shifts can have in challenging organizational inertia. ■

About the author

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This article is adapted from his book, [The Q-Loop: The Art and Science of Lasting Corporate Change](#) (Routledge, 2014).

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