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“BE SURE IT’S ‘BROKE’ BEFORE YOU FIX IT”

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There is an old saying that all of us like to quote at some time or another while at work: "If it ain't ‘broke,’ don’t fix it." It is sound wisdom. I would like to submit another proverb for inclusion into leaders' vocabularies: "Be sure it's ‘broke’ before you fix it."

Too often managers spot something that has gone wrong at work and then immediately create a new rule to ensure that it will never happen again. Managers have good intentions when they make new rules, but many of these new rules are needless and wind up creating more problems than they solve. If a project is not finished on time or a salesperson is too free and easy with their expense account or four assembly-line workers consistently make the same errors or a department abuses their photocopying budget or some workers use company time for personal matters – none of these incidents are valid reasons for creating new and more restrictive rules.

When managers create new rules that punish malefactors *and everyone else* they are simply penalizing all of the employees who are behaving correctly. It is not unlike a football coach who makes everyone run laps because one hot–head on the team mouthed off or forgot a play. This may work somewhat for high school football players, but it won't work with adults at the office. It will cause resentment and frustration, and it will lower employee commitment and loyalty to the organization (Kerr, 1975).

If there has been a failure, a foul-up, a recurring problem or disobedience to policy managers should do two things before they start making new rules. First, look at the totality of the situation to make sure you have a good idea about why the problem exists. For example, if a work team finished an important project late, and were constantly behind schedule, it may be tempting to create a new rule that will force future project teams to turn in detailed written progress reports at several junctures during the time period allotted to the project. This may sound logical, but it will likely just cause project teams to over-focus on creating progress reports. The danger is that future project teams will become "progress report" oriented instead of task-oriented in their focus. So, a leader first needs to do an in-depth analysis to determine exactly why the project team failed to complete their task on time. It could be due to a variety of factors: laziness of some of the individual team members that forced others to carry all of the load, lack of expertise of the team members, lack of support from other departments in the organization, an unrealistic time schedule that was superimposed on the project team by

management, lack of accessibility to key data, etc. There could be many possible reasons why the project was late. It could well be that there is no need to change existing procedural rules at all, and that if there is a need to do so the new rules will only be valid if they are created from a foundation of careful organizational analysis.

Secondly, the leader needs to focus on punishing individuals, not groups. If the problem is due to individual laziness or individual disobedience to company policies or incompetence, do not make a new rule that will ensure compliance by all people – even those who are "broken toys." Why? Your good workers will resent the new rules – after all, they didn't foul up, someone else did, and now their lives are being made more miserable, more hassled, and more bureaucratically restricted than before. If an individual is at fault, reprimand the individual, train the individual, warn the individual, fire the individual – do whatever seems appropriate, but do not make a new rule for *everyone else*. Hold the individual accountable to the old rule – the rule that they violated (Kerr, 1975).

So, remember this adage when you are tempted to add to your company's list of rules: "When in doubt, don't make rules. When in doubt, find out." Find out the real cause behind the problem and only adjust policies for the group if absolutely necessary.

References

Kerr, Steven. (1975) "On the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B." *Academy of Management Journal,* 18 (4): 769-783.