

## Old Dogs, New Tricks



“Houston, we’ve had a problem.” This famous, often quoted one-liner came from Commander James A. Lovell aboard Apollo 13, the third manned mission by NASA, intended to land man on the moon. But a mid-mission problem forced the lunar landing to be aborted. Two days after the April 11, 1970 launch while the spacecraft was en route to the moon, a fault in an electrical system resulted in an explosion. This explosion led to a loss of electrical power and failure of both oxygen tanks. The crew shut down the command module and used the lunar module as a “lifeboat” during the return trip to Earth. Despite great hardship caused by limited power, loss of cabin heat and a shortage of potable water, the crew returned safely to Earth, and the mission was termed a “successful failure.” These “old dogs” truly learned and applied “new tricks” to solve an extremely dangerous and unanticipated problem because their lives hung in the balance.

We had a problem that’s been stealthily spreading all over America. On the surface, it is declining employee job-related training. At its core, in part, is the “you can’t teach old dogs new tricks” mentality. Good news, bad news: The good news is that the U.S. workforce is the most productive in the world, and we have mastered the use of advanced technologies in our capital-intensive manufacturing plants, facilities, utilities and transportation operations. The bad news is that we are losing our competitive advantage over emerging industrial nations around the world, while not addressing the true causes of our growing job losses. While Congress debates and spends, points fingers at each other, and blames prior administrations, we are systematically losing our economic advantages. Our nation’s standard of living hangs in the balance. The number one priority ought to be “regaining our competitive advantage at wealth generation”—producing revenue-generating products and services rather than mortgaging future generations with unfathomable amounts of borrowed money.

Today’s workers in many plants and facilities are our strength; they produce the goods that generate wealth for our businesses, communities and our nation. The buck **starts** here. These “Old Dogs” know what they’re doing and how to get things done. Yes, they can be stubborn at times, but when they put their minds to it, they can definitely get the right things done—and done well! But we can—and we must—get better at what we do.

We will continue to run into challenges (problems or opportunities) along the way to making productivity improvements in the workplace. One of the big challenges that I continue to observe is the traditional approaches to workplace training may not work very well anymore. Businesses

have cut back non-regulatory employee training over the past 20 years or so. Many employees have had minimal formal job-related training. Sure they have been shown, but have they been formally trained and qualified in the specifics of the job? In many cases, no.

Here's the catch: "Old dogs" often resist new tricks. Here we are, firmly implanted in an era of continuous improvement, skills shortages, and senior employees retiring. There's nothing new about that. But here YOU are. You're a long term-employee. You've worked your way up a career ladder to a good job. You've repeatedly demonstrated your skills and knowledge to do your job quite well, thank you. And along comes someone who does not know your job as well as you, telling you there is a better way, or there must be a better way. Makes you feel all warm and fuzzy, right? Certainly not!

Another instance: You might be a newer employee. While most others in the department have worked there for 10 to 30 years or more, you are the "new guy" with only three years on the job. In a workshop with this group of people, very specific equipment operations and maintenance problems are being addressed and some new procedures are developed. You see that these new procedures will be of great value to you because they will make your job much easier: making the right adjustments faster, less trial-and-error, resulting in higher productivity, less scrap product. Wow! What a great benefit this will be! The "Old Dogs" speak: "We don't need that. It'll never work. There's too much that we already know in that procedure. We've all had the training. Meanwhile, you WANT what was just developed! It WILL make your job so much easier." You speak up, but the others want to let things stay the way they are.

It continues to amaze me how many people in today's workplaces struggle to get their work done well. Easier seems better. Doing things over is becoming more and more common because we don't want to disappoint our customers and drive them to our competitors. But operating this way actually increases out operating and maintenance costs, delays deliveries, and hinders growth. Why do experienced employees resist new ideas, new training so much?

Well, I'm one of these "Old Dogs," and I'll speak up for the rest of you. (Let me know if you disagree). I'm proud of what I've accomplished over the years. I can hold my own amongst the best of them. Why would I need to learn anything new and improved? Is it ego or pride that gets in the way? It could be. Is it stubbornness and being set in my ways? It could be that too. When old habits are forced to change for change sake, why should I WANT to change? Habits are comfortable. I don't want to get caught reading or studying or sitting in training for something that I should already know. That could be embarrassing. So I resist: sometimes passively, sometimes vocally.

So how do we get experienced people engaged, involved in continuous improvement especially if it means learning to do some job tasks differently than in the past? Tap into a critical mass. Quite often, there are large groups of employees out there who are hungry for training and development especially as it pertains to job skills and knowledge. Work with them first. Make learning easy and immediately applicable on the job. Along the way, make the information available to any and all others who may work in the same area of the plant or facility. Post it, put it on the shelf, make it accessible on the computer network or on-line. Develop it and use it openly. Make sure that it works well and is actively used by others, no matter how few, who work in the area.

Document the results of the new and improved work methods. Show, report, post the savings and/or the improvements. Communicate the advantages of achieving the improved levels of performance: Benefits to the business, to the employees, and to the customers. Make the improvements and the advantages undeniable. Whoa! That means that the training, the improved methods will generate real results, not virtual results or improvement vapor.

Focus your continuous improvement programs and initiatives on meaningful and tangible results. Beware of banking on the “hopes” that things will improve if we all do these new things. The “Old Dogs” can patiently wait these things out.

Examples of “improvement ideas” that some “Old Dogs” may resist: troubleshooting, root cause analysis, and 5S (workplace organization and orderliness) training programs. While these methods can lead to sustainable gains, they can also be met with skepticism and resistance. Troubleshooting training teaches people how to systematically solve problems, make adjustments or just figure things out. Root-cause analysis training teaches people how to identify the root causes of problems and to develop solutions. 5S programs teach people how to clean up and organize their work areas. Sounds like these should be no-brainers for the modern workplace. The resistance can be huge! But what if we took a slightly different approach?

Rather than leading off with the training or the improvement methods, start with the business case for changing the way things are done—specific reasons, goals, or desired results. For example, focus on very specific problems and engage employees to develop and use new and/or improved troubleshooting charts to communicate cause and effect relationships for quality defects, setups, changeovers, etc. rather than teaching general troubleshooting methods classes. Post these troubleshooting charts in the work area for all to see and use. Measure and communicate the results achieved when the specific troubleshooting charts are used.

Rather than teaching root-cause analysis, use the root cause analysis/problem-solving methods to target very specific and recent problems. Develop and implement actual solutions. Communicate that these methods have worked and will be used in the future for solving problems in the workplace. Measure and communicate the results of using root-cause analysis rather than merely auditing compliance with the root-cause methods.

Then there’s 5S programs. Rather than teaching everyone the principles of 5S and applying them in their work areas, use 5S to address very specific problems and opportunities for improvement: error prevention, productivity improvement, safety and ergonomic enhancement. These opportunities will vary from work area to work area because they all do not necessarily have the same problems. Encourage individual and work group improvements to their initial 5S-induced changes. Measure and communicate the results achieved from each of the specific 5S activities rather than merely auditing 5S compliance.

We “Old Dogs” can be curious and creative. We enjoy a challenge at times. We don’t mind change. We just don’t like being changed. Traditional approaches to employee training may be highly inefficient and ineffective in part because of the “Old Dog” mentality in your

organization. Don't get me wrong: I've nothing against "Old Dogs" in today's workplace. We are needed, and we can and do learn new tricks.

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