

Who is your “Professional Provoker”?

Last week I was talking to the Vice President of Manufacturing for a company that makes custom engineered-to-order high-precision products. His company has been one of our clients for several years. During our conversation he said several things that reminded me of our “JOB”. He reminded me that I had made him mad several times when we first met.

Our “JOB” is to provoke, to challenge, to get your people to think about their problems and potential solutions from a totally different perspective. Our “JOB” is to tweak the nose of “Conventional Wisdom” and then assist in helping solve the problems. Let me give you a few examples.

During the very first educational program for the senior management team, the discussion turned to experience. Several of the attendees claimed to have over twenty-five years...I challenged that. My response was that if they had been doing the same job for twenty-five years they only had one year of experience...twenty-five times...I must tell you, that statement made more than a few of them mad! Remember the vice president... before he became the vice president he was the plant manager of a new start-up plant. He had to teach people who had never seen a grinder how to grind the parts that are used in their products. He was amazed to learn that in six months these new operators could perform at higher levels of productivity and quality than operators that had twenty-five years of experience. Please understand, I think experience is wonderful. However, at what point do you quit learning? At what point does your brain shift into neutral? In your company, can you think of any job that can't be mastered in twelve to eighteen months?

Here is another example: During that same educational program we started to discuss cellular or flow production. Within their production process is a “Monument”. Their “Monument” is heat-treating. It is designed as a large batch, long-cycle-time operation that is stuck smack in the middle of the production process. Every other operation in the process could be accomplished in small lot sizes and much shorter cycle times. The mind set was that cellular or flow production was impossible. My response was to tell them they were right...assuming that they were not willing to take on and deal with the “Monument”! I am very happy to say that today, with a technological breakthrough, we are able to process component parts in a one-piece flow through the entire process. Our lead time has gone from sixteen weeks to forty-eight hours -- raw materials to finished goods in the

box and ready to ship! This never would have happened without challenging the “Monument”.

Whose “JOB” is it to be the “Professional Provoker” in your company? Who challenges the conventional wisdom? Do you tolerate the status quo? Who takes on the “Monuments”, the “Sacred Cows”, and the Conventional Wisdom?

Are you willing to become, and do you have the guts to be, the “Professional Provoker” at your company?