



SwineTex
Consulting Services

Can You Explain Why?

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Anyone who has been the parent of a young child knows that all kids go through a stage of asking why, a lot. Why is the sky blue? Why do cows eat grass? Why don't people eat grass? You know the drill. If you're a parent, you also know that these Q & A sessions can get uncomfortable quite quickly when just a few whys in, you find yourself stumped which is always a little hard on the ego. Sometimes, challenging yourself or your colleagues with a well-intentioned **Why?** can be a powerful way to eliminate wasteful and ineffective practices and ultimately improve performance.

I've been helping a couple of clients recently with developing and analyzing Best Management Practices (BMPs) for their businesses. This involves a deep and detailed process of defining, evaluating and refining day to day practices on the farm. We usually start with defining the current procedures and I find myself spending a lot of time asking, you guessed it, **Why?**

One of my rules for a good policy is that you must be able to articulate a reasonable and rational reason why you're doing something. If you can't explain why you're doing it, you probably shouldn't be doing it. Oftentimes, we don't really know why we're doing what we're doing. Perhaps we've forgotten the original reason why we started doing it and just kept doing it out of habit? Maybe circumstances have changed and what used to make sense no longer makes sense? Maybe we never had a good reason to begin with?

Here's an example. I have a client that was giving antibiotic injections to every pig during processing. When I asked why they were giving the antibiotics, he said they were doing it because "they'd always done it." I told him that wasn't a good enough explanation. We discussed the cost of giving the injection and I challenged whether or not it was necessary or adding value. So, what kind of answer would have satisfied me? If when I asked why they were giving antibiotics at weaning, he had said something like this...

"We were having some trouble with piglet scours and our veterinarian recommended that we start giving this specific antibiotic at this dose to each pig at processing. Since then, we've re-evaluated the strategy monthly considering the current health status and discussed it with our veterinarian. So far, we've decided to keep giving the injection but we might try stopping it soon to see if the problem returns or not."

then I would have happily moved on to the next subject. That is an excellent rationalization for the procedure. He 1) explained specifically why they had decided to start giving the antibiotic 2) explained that he used one of his resources to confirm it was a good decision (his veterinarian) and 3) explained an ongoing process for re-evaluating the decision. In short, he was able to give me a good answer to my question...why?

This also goes for things you are considering doing. A while back I had a client who was considering implementing batch management. When I asked him why he wanted to implement batch management, he said "to improve production." As you might have guessed, I didn't think that was a good enough reason. Batch management can be a useful management tool to address a variety of issues but simply switching to batch management doesn't necessarily result in better results. In fact, in some cases, it could result in poorer results. So, what might have been an acceptable answer to my question? Something like this...

"We would like to implement all-in all-out management practices in our nurseries and finishers to improve health. The challenge is that the size of our nurseries and finishers are too large compared to the number of weaned pigs we're producing. Switching to batch management will allow us to produce larger groups of pigs that are the same age thereby allowing us to operate the nurseries and finishers according the principles of AI/AO management while still efficiently utilizing our facilities."

This is a clear articulation of a well thought-out strategy that will likely result in significant improvement in performance.

I'd encourage you to take the time to challenge yourself by asking yourself why you do the things you do. If you can't come up with a compelling reason to keep doing some things, then quite doing them. In doing so, you can redirect your time and energy to areas that will help you get better results.

About the Author:

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