

We Have Always Done It That Way

Of all the phrases, excuses, and reasons for not making a change that I hear at the businesses that I have visited, the most common of all is “Because we have always done it that way”. The automotive industry, as well as most other industries, has been plagued by the attitude of continuing to do things the way they have always been done. Not that there is anything wrong with the way that some things are done, but this attitude is a sure way to limit growth and in the very best case, yield not more than the same old results. For a department that “appears” to be doing well, that may not sound so bad, but customers and environments are ever changing and failure to change with them is a recipe for disaster.

In the recent months, I have been in several stores that have gone from being steady to two or three times the business they have ever seen before. But all this increase in business has come at a cost. Antiquated practices and manual tasks are the norm for these businesses and the practices are no longer supporting the increased clientele. Then, when presented with the question of why something is done in a certain way, the answer from the staff is, more often than not, “We’ve always done it that way.” They simply cannot explain the rationale – they only know that it would be worrisome to deviate from that norm. This is one of the largest limiting factors that are keeping these businesses from the success they are capable of.

So, the question then becomes, why? Why is it that so many managers are so set in doing things the way they have always been done? Why is it that we expect different results while still performing the same task in the same way we always have? Why when someone attempts to change that process do we fight it so much?

Recently, I read a story on the Internet that can help to explain this phenomenon. It is a much simplified report of research performed in the 1960s on a group of monkeys by G. R. Stephenson:

Start with a cage containing five monkeys. Inside the cage, hang a banana on a string and place a set of stairs under the banana. Before long, a monkey will go to the stairs and climb toward the banana.

As soon as he touches the stairs, researchers spray all the other monkeys with cold water.

After a while, another monkey attempts with the same result... all the other monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Soon, when another monkey tries to climb the stairs, the other monkeys will try to prevent it.

Now, put the cold water away.

Remove one monkey from the cage and replace it with a new one.

The new monkey sees the banana and attempts to climb the stairs. To his shock, all the other monkeys assault him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs he will be assaulted.

Next, remove another of the original five monkeys and replace it with a new one.

The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm, because he is now part of the “team” and has learned the rules.

Now, the monkeys that are beating him up have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs. Neither do they know why they are participating in the beating of the newest monkey.

Finally, having replaced all the original monkeys, none of the remaining monkeys will have ever been sprayed with cold water. Nevertheless, not one of the monkeys will try to climb the stairs for the banana. If they could talk, they would simply say, “We’ve always done it that way.”

Certainly, it’s important to build on your past successes and not simply change for the sake of change, which is a costly exercise in itself. But, never forget that, even if you don’t change, your competitors and customers may.

In an article by Michael Reardon;. He offered 3 compelling ideas to combat the attitude of having always done the same thing:

1. Any time that anyone says, “We’ve Always Done It That Way” call them out on it and let them know that “We have always done it that way” is NEVER, NEVER, ever a good reason for taking some action or performing some process at work (or at home, for that matter).
2. When in meetings, planning sessions, brainstorming exercises, etc., you should APPOINT a Devil’s Advocate. Why do you need to appoint one then? Because if you give that responsibility to a person in front of everyone else, that eliminates the personal nature of it. He/she can offer resistance and/or alternatives without offending those who suggested them because for that meeting, it’s just their job.
3. Have a “process-cleaning” party. Pick a slower week/month for your organization (sooner rather than later) and declare that it will be the semi- annual time to reevaluate all processes and procedures, and of course add that “We have always done it that way” is NOT an acceptable answer to approve a process for another period. A little housecleaning, if you will. I’ve seen this in action and it’s truly effective.

I’m not saying there isn’t value in experience, or things that are tried-and-true. Not at all, but as a consultant I’m usually dealing with businesses that already know things need to be different in some way or else they would not have hired me, and I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been told, even in the midst of compelling data asking for change, that “How we have always done it” should be the credo to follow. Change is hard, yes, but it is needed and worth the effort.

When we ask what we’ve always done that way or why we’ve always done it that way, sometimes there is a good reason. If so, we should understand WHY we are doing something that way and ask if we really should continue it that way. Should we tweak the way we do it and make it slightly better?