

Getting Employees to Think

By T. Scott Gross

For all we do to discourage thinking, you wonder why employees think at all! Let's see, there are cash registers that count change (we're afraid we might lose a dime), computers route phone calls (God forbid we have to talk to a customer), and policies for just about everything. Business is so occupied with holding on that we are losing a most precious commodity—employees who think.

The punishments that go along with breaking the policies are worse. When you asked for water at a fast food restaurant did you notice that slight hesitation? It's because the counter clerk has to account for the missing cup. How about when you buy a pair of socks only to discover they are the wrong color before you get to your car and the clerk who sold them to you not three minutes earlier demands to see proof of purchase? Is it the clerk or is it the system?

It takes a tremendously competent organization to turn employees loose. Here's the first step: Stop thinking for them.

I learned the second most powerful leadership question from a fellow by the name of Bill Oncken. Bill led a one-man crusade to get managers to stop firefighting, to empower everyone, and to identify and then act on the important rather than the merely urgent. He noticed that many times employees would waltz into the boss's office and simply, though subtly, refuse to think by telling the boss that they needed help or that they didn't know how to...

Oncken, the wizard, dreamt up an incredibly powerful team-building question. I can see him now, arms folded, eyebrows

arched as he would reply saying, "Hmmm! That's interesting. Tell me how you are going to solve that problem."

Try it...all together now, "Hmmm! That's interesting. Tell me how you are going to solve that problem." Something amazing will happen. Employees will begin to think. Ask Oncken's second most wonderful question often enough and miracle upon miracles employees will stop saying, boss, I need help, or boss, I don't know how. Instead they will think!

Thinking Point

What are you doing that may discourage thinking?

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