

Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Redesign, restructuring, re-engineering, rightsizing, downsizing, delayering, continuous improvement, kaizen, quality circles, TQM, self-directed teams, six sigma, zero defects, and the list goes on. I once heard a manager refer to it as "management by slogan." We've all experienced it.

When the latest management fad is publicized executives hop on the first plane to Japan, tour several carefully-selected companies, and return with the zeal of a convert. This is the program that will turn the company around - the panacea for all the company's problems. Soon there are banners displayed, slogans shouted, and meetings held to spread the new gospel.

I remember the first time I heard the cry of "quality circles," I was just as excited as everyone else in the company. We were all excited to share our ideas and to come up with ways to make the work easier. Who wouldn't be?

We listened to the executives talk about a new vision for the organization and how we were the company's greatest assets. It all sounded so convincing. We developed a name for our team and created rules for working together. We used the analysis tools we were taught to find out what was making our jobs difficult. We even came up with ways to eliminate or reduce the difficulties and save the company money at the same time.

We proudly took our ideas to our manager and asked permission to implement them. That's where things began to break down. Our boss said that he would turn in our ideas to the leadership team who would evaluate them. One month later, we hadn't heard so we asked about them. Our boss said that those things took time and that we probably would be told if the company was going to implement any of them. We never heard any more about it until an all-employee meeting was held. One of our team members (they told us to call each other that) asked the CEO about our ideas. The CEO said that he couldn't remember them specifically, but was sure they had been seriously considered, and that someone would get back to us. After a couple of similar experiences, and no feedback, our team couldn't find a good reason to meet. So we quit meeting and went back to business as usual.

A couple of years later, guess what happened. We all received a memo from the CEO announcing a new program. The company was going to try an employee empowerment program. Employees would now be empowered to do things however they saw fit. It felt like *deja vu*.

Sound familiar? It should. The above example is the rule rather than the exception as management fads have become a mainstay in American business today. What's more, it's the HR department that tends to lead the charge with each new program, giving HR staff the reputation of being the company cheerleaders.

Frankly, I believe HR professionals can take some of the blame for management fad-hopping. After all, isn't HR supposed to understand how employees respond to these practices? Haven't we been trained in organizational behavior, management theory, and employee motivation? Absent a word from HR experts, how can we expect managers not to plow ahead with each new program?

Personally, I believe that HR staff who are willing to leave the "cheerleading squad"

can help break this cycle. But it means that HR is going to have to step to the plate and take a couple of swings. Sure it means you may strike out. But don't expect to make a contribution to the company by remaining on the sidelines. State your position as an expert in organization behavior. Be clear about the underlying principles that will make the program successful. And communicate those things that will lead to failure. Point out, in business terms, the price for cynicism and resignation. Encourage rigorous analysis of every change in direction.

Most of all, give HR a reputation for injecting common sense into the conversation and being a business leader, not a follower of fads.

Kevin Herring is President of Tucson-based Ascent Management Consulting, a firm specializing in individual, group, and organization effectiveness.

At Ascent we believe that organizations are only as successful as the systems that engage the individuals who work there. Ascent Management Consulting is committed to creating management, culture, organization, and governance systems that enable personal fulfillment and organization effectiveness. For information about Ascent Management Consulting, my work, or philosophies, please contact me at 520-742-7300, KevinH@AscentMgt.com or visit me at www.AscentMgt.com