



/// Problem Solver or “Mother-in-Law”?

How Does *Your* Leadership Team See You?

I am blessed to be able to meet and work with a wide diversity of quality professionals and teams in my travels each year. For the Quality and Auditing community, by far the single greatest frustration I hear is getting support (be it resources, funding, or cooperation) for their efforts and initiatives. I hear stories about how we (or they) have to overcome resistance, passive aggression, and occasionally, open hostility from the very people we (or they) are there to help! Our budgets are often the first to be cut and the last to be funded. People give us the bare minimum information we request and often, we have to “pull” it out of them. There is a very clear pattern in all of these stories that we share with each other. What is the Root Cause? How can it be that management holds our expertise and skills in such low regard when our career field has so much to offer? Perhaps the key to this is in how we are perceived by leadership and the workforce.

When I was first married, I was quickly exposed to the bane of all young newlyweds...A visit from “the Mother-In-Law”. It did not matter which mom visited, we were “afflicted” and the results and the distress was the same. We rushed around trying to straighten up everything and hide what we could. I knew that I could not complain or “just say no”; this visit was going to happen! When she arrived, I tried to be polite. But even with our best efforts, nothing ever seemed to live up to her standards, there was always something we should be doing differently, and the complaints were (seemingly) non-stop. Sound familiar? This was also my experience with the Quality and Auditing teams that visited me while I was a program manager and business executive! I could not help but notice that the activities and the results were strikingly similar to both types of visits. I am a member of several CEO forums and have informally discussed this situation with many of my peers. Unfortunately, our auditing profession is far more likely to be viewed as a visit from “the mother-in-law” rather than as highly regarded problem solvers.

A good friend of mine, Mr. Eric Roden, recently gave me a great example of his experiences along these same lines. Eric started off by telling me about the new initiative Quality had implemented at his company (a large pharmaceutical firm) while he was a Director of Operations. “They created a new position called ‘Quality Line Support’, QLS’s for short. It did not take us long to realize they were ‘Quick Line Stoppers’! All they did was interfere with production without adding any value to our team or assist in helping to resolve any of the problems they wrote up. We were not impressed...” Eric then told me that he was later promoted to Manager of Quality and Compliance and was now responsible for the “Quick Line Stoppers”. Eric spent some time learning his new organization and evaluating their deployment model. “When it was time, I gathered them together and told them they would be moving out of their offices and now ‘living’ on the line. In addition, they were now responsible for working with the team to do a true Root Cause Analysis of the problem and contribute to helping solve the problems they were finding. I forced them to stand and watch the Gemba until they truly understood the problem instead of just reporting it and walking away. This new change was not met with universal acclimation...in fact; one person quit because apparently, solving problems was ‘demeaning’. But we kept at it and soon changed the culture and our relationship with the work force. We were now there to help make product, not just ‘throw stones’. The change in perception by leadership and management was significant. When we helped them, they were more than willing to work with us and everybody won!”

Eric’s example is spot on target with my growing sense of how we can all become more Value-Added and viewed as skilled resources and less like a “Mother-In-Law”. Many people have related their frustration at how

an “outsider/consultant” can come in and say the same things they have been saying yet get a completely different reception. I believe this is in large part due to this perception that the “outsiders” are perceived as being there to help solve problems and we, the “insiders” are viewed as simply problem documenters. Remember... **perception is reality!** Think of your workplace as your home... people don’t appreciate being told how to run their homes and it’s the same situation for our work areas. We have been conditioned to view our objective as simply documenting problems and pointing out process flaws. But real value comes when we help the workforce solve the situation and eliminate the issues that are impacting quality and performance. Our skill sets are tailor-made for the role of problem solving and these skills and our toolsets have been honed by contributions from some of the finest minds in business. You only have to look at examples like Juran, Deming, Shewart, and Taiichi Ohno to realize that today, we have a rich history of problem solving to draw from. Would Deming even be remembered today if he only highlighted the faults and flaws of poor processes? Deming went far beyond this to show people what could be achieved and developed solutions that generated real sustainable results that not only helped his industry, it changed our country! We talk about Root Cause and problem solving, but how much of what we do is nothing more than bureaucratic paperwork, documenting “Findings” that add no value to our products or services, and mimics typical “Mother-In-Law” behavior?

The answer to these questions can change how we are perceived and what we can deliver to provide greater value to our team and our organizations. We need less “us versus them” and more cross functional team work and engagement. We need less criticism and more rapid improvement efforts. How we are perceived by others is a function of our usefulness to them and how we are viewed as helping them obtain the objectives we are both pursuing. Are we simply trying to hit a certain number in our audits, narrowly focused on making our target metric for QA write-ups, or are we truly trying to help our organization make more and better products, provide better services, and win more market share? Each one of us needs to think this through and not just assume that we are doing our job because of our output. Some people tell me “I’m not allowed to problem solve, I’m only allowed to document”. To them I would say “True Leadership Is the Exercise of Influence in the Absence of Authority!”[©] We can use our training and expertise to show people what is possible and how they can make the changes that are needed to achieve their full potential. As a program manager and business leader I did not care nearly as much about the fact that there was a problem as I did about what we were going to do in terms of addressing it and resolving it as quickly and as safely as possible. The people that took the self initiative to begin the problem solving process earned my respect and admiration.

Our profession has done a very good job in recent years helping our companies focus more on increasing Value-Added efforts from the perspective of our customers. I believe we should now use our own tools on ourselves to increase our own perceived Value-Added contributions to our leadership team. When they see us as true problem solvers, I believe we will have more support for our efforts than we can handle!

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