

Why Do I Do What I Do?

By Sunil Thawani,

While discharging cargo from a ship, few Hatch Tally Clerks fill in a Hatch Tally sheet. It describes what cargo came out of what hatch. Once cargo is discharged on the quay, it is stored in different sheds & another tally sheet called Receive Tally sheet is filled. Both the tally sheets contain near similar information like quantities, type of cargo, number of packs etc. The information between both the tally sheets is then tallied by Cargo Clerks.

When the Cargo Supervisor was asked why do you have to prepare 2 different Tally sheets where as one can serve the purpose with minor modification. His reply was " It's been going on for the last 10 - 15 years ".

A dusty corner in a shed is earmarked as " Records ". It contains about 20 different types of records like Extra Work Report, Daily Report, Auction Report, Employee Attendance Punch Cards and many more box files. Each religiously maintained for 5 to 7 years.

When the Shed In charge was asked why do you keep all the records for 5 –7 years, his reply was " just in case" i.e. just in case somebody like Auditors, Management, Courts may ask for it. When probed further it became clear that usually there are only 5-8 enquiries a year for a particular record & that too for a 2-3 years old record. Then why keep ALL the records for 5-7 years? Answer was nobody has asked us to dispose off. There are also situations wherein after 7 years, some records are shifted to another " safe " location for just in case situation.

We come across many such examples of " We have been doing this for ages " of " Just in case " in our routine work. Behind all such examples is a common element of basic assumptions & beliefs among people of doing a particular job in a particular way & not to question it. Technology, policies, procedures, customer requirements, people - ***just about everything has changed, except the way we do things here***. The " taken for granted " view. The existing mindset.

While reading books on Reengineering by Michael Hammer & James Champy. I learnt two simple, yet very powerful questions:

"Why Do I Do What I Do?" &

"Why Do I Do The Way I Do?"

Having the courage to ask these simple questions is what is needed. Not only to others but to ourselves too. Repeated questioning may lead to answers, which can open up a whole lot of improvement opportunities - some incremental, some

radical. It can even fundamentally shift the existing paradigm & take us to a totally new paradigm.

You may like to know what happened to Tally sheets or records examples & what opportunities it provided.

Preparation of Hatch Tally sheet was immediately discontinued and 4 personnel per ship were released. It resulted in saving of more than US \$ 300000 annually on a recurring basis, improving productivity of discharging cargo and vessel turn around time at berth. Plus accuracy of data.

In the case of records management, except for few important records, retention period for most of the records were radically reduced from usual 7 years to 3 months/ 1 year. This pioneering initiative by one department set an example & the success story was used to initiate change in other departments. Apart from dramatically improving the management of records and creating space, there were no more dusty corners to be taken care of.

Above examples do not necessarily radically transform the business, but it surely demonstrates the power of questioning the routine. All this happened because somebody had the courage to ask a simple and (may be) foolish sounding question. Questioning the generally accepted routines & basic assumptions can help in changing the practice of way we do things.

When late Dr. W. Edwards Deming was asked what is his secret of success? He replied, " I ask the right question. The more I dwell on it, the more I realize, what wonders can this simple approach of asking the right question can bring & begin the change process.

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