There are No Best Practices

There's a reason why Not Invented Here (NIH) is so prominent in our lives. We have an inherent distrust in anything brought to us for our own good. Whoever created it and is foisting it on us doesn't know our conditions, our business, our concerns. They don't know better than we do how to make our lives better or our results better. Just because it worked over there doesn't mean it will work over here. In fact, it probably won't.

We are all looking for something that will make our business better than our competitors'. We want to be more appealing to our customers and demonstrate that we provide better value. There is tremendous pressure to meet the next reporting period's forecast regardless of the realities of the day. We look for shortcuts, quick ways to see improvement in our operation. What better way than to subscribe to "best practices"?

A "best practice" is a process or approach that has been deemed through experimentation and evaluation to be the most efficient or most prudent method of performing a particular task. It is generally recognized by a peer group as an excellent solution. Clearly, adopting a best practice is the quickest way to better performance. There's no trial and error, no investigating necessary. Just put it in place and watch the numbers take off.

I have spent hours developing solutions with teams thinking that once it worked in one location or with one group of people that it would be a simple matter to copy and paste it everywhere the same original process was followed. The solution often worked well, sometimes incredibly well, at location 1, only to die a fiery death at locations 2+.

I tried to change the delivery of the solution. I'd demonstrate that the problems were identical. I'd show how the root causes were the same. I'd express the elegance of the solution and how

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effectively it worked over there. I'd have people from location 1 provide testimony at the other locations.

All to no avail.

The solution was dead on arrival, only it wasn't always that apparent. Location 2 would give it a half-hearted try to make it work. They'd feel obligated to do so. In a matter of days or weeks, the solution died, and things went back to the way they were.

Is there no hope?

There is much to be learned from those who have gone before us. It is very enlightening to study problems, root causes, and solutions from related areas to our own. These efforts can spark deeper understanding of our own situation and be a creative light to solving our own problem. Leaders can and should bring these examples to their organization and encourage their study. Leaders should not dictate the solution. There is no truth to "Awesome Company A did this, and we'll be awesome if we do it too!"

Regardless of how good an idea is, buy in comes from being the creator, not the adopter. We can use what was done elsewhere as we examine our situation. The understanding of the problem, clarification of the point of failure, and identification of the root cause can all leverage the original work. It can validate the findings here. The solution has to be created from scratch by the new team. It's reasonably likely given the number of factors that are very similar between locations that the solution will be very similar. The solution, however, will be unique in certain ways that are critical to location 2 and unimportant to location 1. It is this uniqueness that drives the buy in.

We think we save time (and thus dollars) by sharing solutions, but in reality it costs more than sharing the experience and then allowing the teams to do their own thing. The truly best practice is the learning and problem solving experience, not the nuts and bolts of the solution.

Several years ago I worked with a team to develop a system that would cut lead time on a testing program in half to accommodate changes in expectations for both speed and volume of production. We did all the analysis, and I drove a solution that paced the work to the new expectations and prevented the team from working on jobs that weren't in support of the targets. We followed all the rules of the best practice of balancing the mix and volume of work to the demand. All went well at first.

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Soon the new process began to break down. Individuals began to ignore the standards in place and returned to the prior method of working. They started to fall behind the new targets. Gathered together, they revealed that they lost accountability when the jobs were divided into tasks. They reworked the solution so that they retained accountability of one person to one job, but they folded in the analysis that indicated how much work needed to flow through each test station each day. The solution they devised honored needs they had while incorporating the requirements of the business.

So, this is the role of the leader:

- to provide a vision and a nearer term target,
- to teach and mentor methods and techniques,
- to make the organization aware of successes elsewhere within and outside their own company.

Step two for the leader is to coach the individuals and teams to use these skills and knowledge to develop their own solutions that are aligned with the vision and directed toward the target.

Leaders don't actually know all the answers, but the organization can discover the ones they need. An added bonus: when the team owns their solution, they also fix it when it falls short.

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