

Why Don't Our Systems Ever Get Better?

By Kevin Lee Elder



I am often asked to come in and analyze a major system in an organization to see what is wrong with it. I am often asked by the employees if the company I am analyzing is different from other companies. They never seem to know why their company can never get anything done or get a new system in that will help them get things done. They wonder why consultants get paid so well to fix their systems. It is really quite easy, as I teach my students, there is no easy button or magic wand to fix things. You need to have a childlike attitude towards asking questions. From Rudyard Kipling I learned,

I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who. I send them over land and sea; I send them east and west; But after they have worked for me, I give them all a rest.

I teach my students and companies I consult with that they need to question everything, and look for new solutions at every opportunity. If they don't question everything the systems will not get better. Most organizations are like the old story of the five monkeys.

Start with a cage containing five monkeys. Inside the cage, hang a banana on a string and place a set of stairs under it.

Before long, a monkey will go to the stairs and start to climb towards the banana. As soon as he touches the stairs, spray all of the monkeys with cold water. After a while, another monkey makes an attempt with the same result - all the monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Pretty soon, when another monkey tries to climb the stairs, the other monkeys will try to prevent it.

Now, turn off the cold water. Remove one monkey from the cage and replace it with a new one. The new monkey sees the banana and wants to climb the stairs. To his surprise and horror, all of the other monkeys attack him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be assaulted.

Next, remove another of the original five monkeys and replace it with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm. Again, replace a third original monkey with a new one. The new one makes it to the stairs and is attacked as well. Two of the four monkeys that beat him have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs, or why they are participating in the beating of the newest monkey. After replacing the fourth and fifth original monkeys, all the monkeys that have been sprayed with cold water have been replaced. Nevertheless, no monkey ever again approaches the stairs. Why not? Because as far as they know that's

the way it's always been around here. And that's how company policy and many information systems begin.

Many times when analyzing a problem system the users don't know WHY they do certain processes. They don't know WHO needs these reports they are creating but they create them anyway. They don't know WHERE the data is coming from but they use it anyway. They don't know HOW to restore the old backup data so they do without. They don't know WHAT other reports can come out of the system besides the ones they regularly receive. And worst of all, they don't know WHEN it all began, since it was long ago before they started doing the job. If this fits your organization bring in a consultant (or an IS class project team if you want save some money) and get a fresh childlike review of your system. You might no longer be asking why your systems never get better. Who knows, you might even be able to eat the bananas after all!