



Managing Your Business

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For years I used to say that a good survey practice required three surveyors:

The first to know the law of property;

The second to know business skills and;

The third was a social worker to deal with people.

In the case of a sole practitioner, the three types of surveyors existed in one body but all three were needed. In the late 1990s, I amended my cliché to include a fourth surveyor. As the tools of our industry have evolved so quickly, today's practice needs a hardware/software/applications specialist or wizard, a "technology wiz".

Running our survey practice, we are constantly faced with the challenge of improving our business. Too often we hesitate or withdraw from the challenge of examining our enterprise and our goals, as the task seems too time consuming. But since our time is limited, all the more reason why it should be measured, valued and not wasted. Perhaps we can make the challenge of improvement less daunting by asking a simple question.

If you could change just one thing about your business, what would it be?

Before you answer this question yourself, pose it to your staff. After all, they are the ones doing the jobs and will be implementing the changes. Invite your staff to share in the solution, because only if they buy in will you be successful in implementing the changes. Staff are more likely to be energized and enthused about change when it is their idea.

Start by having each person ask himself or herself, what activity do I do that is:

Inefficient, unproductive or unnecessary?

Could be (should be) done by someone else?

Contributes little or nothing to the value of

our business?

The answers to these simple questions should provide several opportunities to improve the efficiency of operations and the profitability of the business. No doubt you can think of many more questions, some specific, some general, that will assist. But, in each case, repeat the key words used in the third question "our business". Your name may be on the business, on the trucks and on the drawings, but if you and your staff think as one; our business, our trucks and our drawings, you are well on the way to improving the business.

Remind your team that working harder is only a short-term solution and that long lasting improvement only comes from working smarter. Working smarter happens when staff receive training on new applications and new equipment. How much time do you spend training/teaching your staff? Is it effective? I believe the most effective teaching is done on site. Why? Because the lesson can be tailored to the site conditions your field crew has experienced or is about to experience.

Those of you who have given a teenager a driving lesson can relate to this situation. Driving provides real situations and real outcomes for both the student and instructor. Each set of instructions or word of advice can lead to many questions. For instance, when I gave my teens driving lessons, I learned that the four-letter word "STOP" can mean many things i.e., slow down, look to see why I should stop, stop just ahead, stop soon, stop sometime, etc.

After some hair raising experiences, I realized that instructions which may seem straightforward, often require additional direction, particularly to the inquisitive teen mind. In our case, we adopted the phrase "stop now" which meant don't ask questions, just hammer the brake pedal until the vehicle stops moving and then you can ask all the questions you want.

The point is, practical training is much more effective because it addresses these five conditions:

Presentation - present the information in a clear and concise manner.

Application - explain the point by relating it to a specific experience of the trainee.

Comprehension - retell the information in another way to ensure understanding.

Absorption - ask the student to explain the matter and make a sketch to illustrate the situation. By having the student use four cognitive skills, hearing, speaking and visualization and drawing we greatly increase the absorption of knowledge.

Retention - have the trainee apply the knowledge to solve a similar problem in a different situation. Repetition enhances retention.

Staff welcome the opportunity to learn and to expand their skills. Skill sets can be most easily enhanced by increasing the level of expertise in a niche area. However, new millennium businesses are better served by mul skill set employees with a broader knowledge base. For instance, the employee with several skill set bundles, or parallel knowledge streams, can be both a CAD operator and a GPS receiver operator, or title record searcher and an office administrator.

In the 1950s, people worked at the same job and with the same employer for their entire working life. By the mid-1970s, people worked at the same job, but for several employers. Twenty-five years later employees expect and want to have multiple careers. The Y2K employee wants and enjoys the excitement of simultaneous multiple careers. If you think you don't understand the Generation X person, think back on your own career as expert in real property law, business person and social worker. Sounds to me like a similar career style.

I guess we were just ahead of our time.

