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I'm Not with Stupid

By David R. Butcher

Our society seems to be dumbing down, and this lack of critical thinking skills results in serious business mistakes. When you convert a half-witted workforce into power thinkers, you retain your best talent and increase both customer satisfaction and product quality goals.

Last May, in [a speech](#) that marked the launch of the North American Occupational Safety and Health Week, OSHA Assistant Secretary of Labor Edwin Foulke displayed pictures showing how careless adults can be when it comes to safety. Blunt and perhaps insensitive, nevertheless the pictures illustrated some downright stupid people in the workplace. We even have [awards](#) for such people.

Also last year, and perhaps the mother of scary employee goofs, German utility EnBW admitted that its employees [lost the keys](#) to the most highly secure areas of its nuclear plant in Philippsburg. After months of fruitless searching, the company announced plans to change the locks.

Blame poorer education, blame lack of training, blame reality television; it seems society has been dumbing down for years — and its effect on the bottom line in business should have us worried. The most common reason/excuse heard today when anything goes wrong is that *someone* didn't think.

As a recent white paper entitled "[Creating Smart Organizations](#)" from [Ascendant Consulting](#), recently noted:

A lack of critical thinking skills results in product

recalls, bumbled sourcing decisions, new product failures in the marketplace, plant implementations gone awry and the general torpedoing of sound strategies by flawed execution.

Consider just a handful from last year:

1) In May, Bausch & Lomb issued [a global recall](#) of its ReNu with MoistureLoc contact-lens solution after tests showed it could leave users susceptible to a potentially blinding infection.

2) Defects in batteries made by Sony for portable computing caused a handful of notebooks to burst into spectacularly photogenic flames. The result was the biggest [computer-related recall](#) ever, as Dell replaced the batteries in more than millions of laptops, as did Apple, Lenovo/IBM and others.

3) In August, Natural Selection Foods, a grower whose produce is sold nationwide under well-known brand names such as Dole and Ready Pac, distributed bagged spinach [contaminated with E. coli](#). After hundreds fell sick, Natural Selection announced it would lay off 164 workers in the face of a 70 percent drop in revenue.

4) Ham by British food processor H.R. Hargreaves & Son included "dog sh*t" on the packages' [complete list of ingredients](#). Hargreaves fired the employee responsible for the prank and began a recall of the mislabeled packages.

5) Owner's manuals in more than a million Honda vehicles listed a toll-free number

to help drivers reach the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; however, Honda [incorrectly printed](#) the area code as 800 rather than 888, leading callers to a recorded message in which a woman's sultry voice encourages them to "call 1-800-918-TALK for just 99 cents per minute."

(It is worth asking why the auto industry, which may be the most "process-happy" manufacturing sector in existence, very well may top the list in [product recalls](#).)

Personnel at all levels of the organization — from shop floor workers through senior managers — are not thinking at the level necessary to out-pace competition, [according to David Fields](#), managing director at [Ascendant Consulting](#).

Experience shows what makes some people the best in their field is power thinking, notes Fields. They may not be more experienced or even better trained in technical skills. Rather, according to Fields, "It is what they do with the three pounds of gray matter between their ears.

"Create a company of power thinkers, not just a cadre at the top, to exceed your growth expectations."

Companies staffed top to bottom with power thinkers make fewer costly mistakes, develop solutions that are more creative, spend less time and money creating detailed processes, experience less inter-departmental antipathy and enjoy higher sales, Fields says.

Consider the following:

1) Develop thinking skills

Strive to develop these six key traits in personnel at every organizational level: perspective, curiosity, flexibility, courage, tenacity and, of course, creativity.

2) Create a learning environment

In order to look beyond the obvious and challenge the status quo, the company must adopt two cultural

commitments: a belief that "mistakes are distinct from demerits"; and open, problem-focused communication across departments and levels. Do not embrace failure; learn from it.

3) Organizational alignment

The single, overarching objective for the entire organization should be to increase sales efficiently. "When everyone in your company is focused against the same ultimate goal, then every mistake can be discussed in terms of its impact on sales," says Fields. Production line workers sometimes feel removed from the company's singular goal, but, in fact, they are not.

4) Consistency over time

Critical thinking skills are not created overnight or at a weekend seminar. "Plan on at least six months of consistent coaching before the new habits take root," writes Fields.

Likewise, William Taylor, the founding editor of [Fast Company](#) and author of [Mavericks at Work: Why the Most Original Minds in Business Win](#), recently told [Workforce Management](#) that "good managers in today's world must enlist everyone in the business to drive change and move things ahead." Ideas aren't the province of CEOs or top managers only; they can come from anywhere and anybody. That kind of thinking must be fostered, and everyone must be pushed "to think of how to do things better."

"You can't always outspend the competition," Taylor said, "but you can out-think them."

Of course, no matter how much employees and employers think, no matter how smart, mistakes will happen. Even fostering critical thinking skills across the entire organization and drawing on the brainpower of the entire workforce will not eliminate goofs 100 percent — but perhaps, at the very least, we wouldn't have to second-guess the location of the keys to the nearest nuclear plant.

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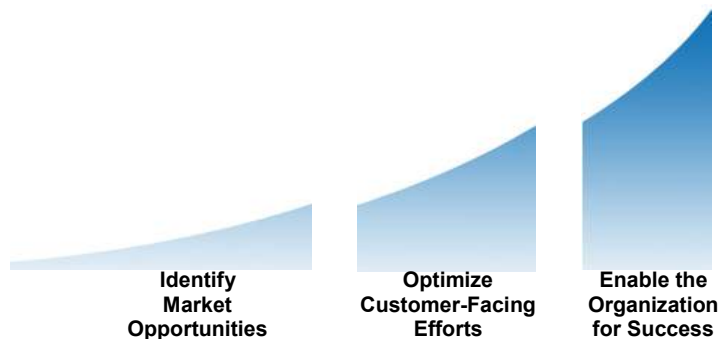
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Services

We apply a wide range of approaches and interventions based on our years of experience and broad access to subject matter experts.

One of the fundamentals of our success is using superior understanding of customers to make every aspect of our client's business better. The way we envision it is shown below:



Identify Market Opportunities— We have identified well in excess of \$1 Billion in new market opportunities for our clients. For instance, Kodak's only successful venture into a new vertical market was based on our work for them. That business area was later purchased by ITT for a substantial premium.*

Optimize Customer Facing Efforts— Our clients call upon us for:

- Strategy Optimization
- Business Planning
- Message Optimization
- Channel Optimization

For instance, we wrote Schering Plough Consumer Healthcare's selling presentations.*

Enable the Organization for Success — Our experience is extensive in:

- Organization structure optimization
- Process Optimization
- Production Optimization

For instance, we completely reorganized Ross Products' retail sales force.*

*Many more examples of our work are available on our website.