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28 | AMES BUSINESS MONTHLY | OCTOBER 2013

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Making work meaningful

Back when I engineered transmissions for road construction equipment, I loved to observe our customers' products at work in the field. My family accused me of planning our vacations for road construction. While other stalled drivers were throwing up their hands while waiting in line behind the flag person, I was as happy as a kid at an amusement park.

Thus it was particularly eye opening when I was assigned to a facility in Illinois which manufactured components for those same transmissions. Here employees were roughly 300 miles away from their transmission assembly line customers. More importantly, they were one link further removed from the end customer in the supply chain. Most had no idea where their handiwork eventually ended up.

This situation was epitomized for me during an open house tour when I observed one of our machinists point to a part and explain to his family, "That's my hole." From that point it became my personal mission to increase the meaning in our employees' work.

We started by taking a group of supervisors and employees to tour the assembly plant each month.

Here, they got to see their components being assembled, meet their immediate customers and discuss issues face to face. Suddenly, "those idiots in Iowa" became reasonable folks.

The highlight of the day was buckling them into the seat of a skid steer loader or a bulldozer and watching looks of sheer terror turn into excitement as they gained confidence in controlling the vehicle.

The trips were talked about for months afterwards.

I encouraged our sales folks to help themselves to every brochure in our customers' literature racks for vehicles which used our products and asked them to send them to our facility. I would translate the product used into the components which our employees produced and thus post the pamphlets on the appropriate cell's bulletin board.

We had our field service team visit the plant to provide lessons on how the product



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worked and why various features which we machined were so important to the performance and life of the vehicle it would ultimately propel.

In short, our employees no longer simply drilled holes into chunks of cast iron. They became responsible for entire components, knew the names of the people in Iowa who assembled them, what features were most important and why, and that they eventually ended up in a Caterpillar road roller, Bobcat skid steer loader, or some other specific piece of equipment. (Perhaps they even started to plan their vacations for road construction.)

Patrick Lencioni's book, "Three Signs of a Miserable Job" (essential reading for anyone supervising people) highlights three ingredients for unfulfilling work:

- Anonymity (i.e., I don't matter)
- Irrelevance (i.e., my work doesn't matter)
- Lack of measurement (i.e., my performance doesn't matter)

Any of Lencioni's three signs result in a serious deficiency of the Meaning Quotient or "MQ" of work, a term coined in a January 2013 McKinsey Quarterly article.

Since the mid-1990s, John Deere's Gold Key program has allowed customers to

tour final assembly plants to observe their vehicle being built, even starting it up and driving it off the line after turning the signature gold key. Last year, Deere's Waterloo plant alone hosted more than 3,000 such tours. That's an average of over 12 per work day.

While Deere no doubt gains customer loyalty points through the Gold Key program, the biggest benefit may very well be the personal significance and sense of accomplishment which each of the assembly workers receives as they complete their portion of work under the watchful eyes of expectant customers, many who have traveled for several hours to observe the process.

The next time you find yourself lamenting that "nobody cares," take a good look in the mirror. And get to work to make sure they do.

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