

Stories for Continuous Improvement & Leadership

The fish baking story (to challenge belief systems and assumptions, and illustrate pointless routine and the need for questioning)

A little girl was watching her mother prepare a fish for dinner. Her mother cut the head and tail off the fish and then placed it into a baking pan. The little girl asked her mother why she cut the head and tail off the fish. Her mother thought for a while and then said, "I've always done it that way - that's how babicka (Czech for grandma) did it."

Not satisfied with the answer, the little girl went to visit her grandma to find out why she cut the head and tail off the fish before baking it. Grandma thought for a while and replied, "I don't know. My mother always did it that way."

So the little girl and the grandma went to visit great grandma to find ask if she knew the answer. Great grandma thought for a while and said, "Because my baking pan was too small to fit in the whole fish".

(Ack M Hamanova)

Two brothers and the geese story (initiative, responsibility, thinking outside the box, anticipating strategic anticipation, adding value to service, value and reward)

Two sons work for their father on the family's farm. The younger brother had for some years been given more responsibility and reward, and one day the older brother asks his father to explain why. The father says, "First, go to the Kelly's farm and see if they have any geese for sale - we need to add to our stock." The brother soon returns with the answer, "Yes they have five geese they can sell to us."

That father then says, "Good, please ask them the price."

The son returns with the answer, "The geese are £10 each."

The father says, "Good, now ask if they can deliver the geese tomorrow." And duly the son returns with the answer, "Yes, they can deliver the geese them tomorrow."

The father asks the older brother to wait and listen, and then calls to the younger brother in a nearby field, "Go to the Davidson's Farm and see if they have any geese for sale - we need to add to our stock." The younger brother soon returns with the answer, "Yes, they have five geese for £10 each, or ten geese for £8 each; and they can deliver them tomorrow - I asked them to deliver the five unless they heard otherwise from us in the next hour. And I agreed that if we want the extra five geese we could buy them at £6 each."

The father turned to the older son, who nodded his head in appreciation - he now realised why his brother was given more responsibility and reward.

(adapted from a suggestion - thanks PI)

“Defects are outcomes from processes perfectly configured to provide them. The challenge is to remember that defects are just the voice of the process speaking to you... if you will only listen.”

Where Lean Thoughts can become Reality

"Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow."

Ronald. E. Osborn

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The Donkey Story (positive attitudes, turning problems into opportunities)

One day a farmer's donkey fell into a well. The farmer frantically thought what to do as the stricken animal cried out to be rescued. With no obvious solution, the farmer regretfully concluded that as the donkey was old, and as the well needed to be filled in anyway, he should give up the idea of rescuing the beast, and simply fill in the well. Hopefully the poor animal would not suffer too much, he tried to persuade himself. The farmer asked his neighbours help, and before long they all began to shovel earth quickly into the well. When the donkey realised what was happening he wailed and struggled, but then, to everyone's relief, the noise stopped.

After a while the farmer looked down into the well and was astonished by what he saw. The donkey was still alive, and progressing towards the top of the well. The donkey had discovered that by shaking off the dirt instead of letting it cover him, he could keep stepping on top of the earth as the level rose. Soon the donkey was able to step up over the edge of the well, and he happily trotted off.

Life tends to shovel dirt on top of each of us from time to time. The trick is to shake it off and take a step up. (Ack TB)

Chickens (communications story)

This is allegedly a true story. Engineers at a major aerospace company were instructed to test the effects of bird-strikes (notably geese) on the windshields of airliners and military jets. To simulate the effect of a goose colliding with an aircraft travelling at high speed, the test engineers built a powerful gun, with which they fired dead chickens at the windshields. The simulations using the gun and the dead chickens worked extremely effectively, happily proving the suitability of the windshields, and several articles about the project appeared in the testing industry press.

It so happened that another test laboratory in a different part of the world was involved in assessing bird-strikes - in this case on the windshields and drivers' cabs of new very high speed trains. The train test engineers had read about the pioneering test developed by the aerospace team, and so they approached them to ask for specifications of the gun and the testing methods. The aerospace engineers duly gave them details, and the train engineers set about building their own simulation.

The simulated bird-strike tests on the train windshields and cabs produced shocking results. The supposed state-of-the-art shatter-proof high speed train windshields offered little resistance to the high-speed chickens; in fact every single windshield that was submitted for testing was smashed to pieces, along with a number of train cabs and much of the test booth itself.

The horrified train engineers were concerned that the new high speed trains required a safety technology that was beyond their experience, so they contacted the aerospace team for advice and suggestions, sending them an extensive report of the tests and failures.

The brief reply came back from the aero-engineers: "You need to defrost the chickens...."
(Ack S Money)

The Cannibals (a story about management)

A big corporation hired several cannibals. "You are all part of our team now," said the HR manager during the welcome briefing. "You get all the usual benefits and you can go to the cafeteria for something to eat, but please don't eat any of the other employees." The cannibals promised they would not.

A few weeks later the cannibals' boss remarked, "You're all working very hard, and I'm satisfied with you. However, one of our secretaries has disappeared. Do any of you know what happened to her?" The cannibals all shook their heads, "No," they said.

After the boss left, the leader of the cannibals said to the others angrily, "Right, which one of you idiots ate the secretary?"

A hand rose hesitantly in admission. "You fool!" said the leader, "For weeks we've been eating managers and no one noticed anything, but noooooo, you had to go and eat someone important!..."

- Enthusiasm
- Disillusionment
- Panic
- Search for the guilty
- Punishment of the innocent
- Praise and honours for the non-participants