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We often talk about the advantages of synergy:  $1 + 1 = 3$  (or more). Synergy is considered a good thing because the sum of the parts is often greater, and better, than the individual parts themselves. But what about what I call “anti-synergy?” If synergy is defined as above, then we can define anti-synergy as when the negative parts add up to a greater negative as a whole than they do individually; that is:  $-1 + -1 = -3$  (or worse).

Too often organizations will procrastinate about dealing with a bad situation. Sometimes they rationalize the inaction by thinking that the problem person or situation will eventually be “dragged along” with everyone else—they’ll eventually see the light or do the right thing if you just give them enough time. The truth is that the sooner an organization can deal with a problem person or situation, the better that organization will ultimately perform. By dragging their feet about dealing with problems, these organizations inadvertently create a negative energy (or synergy, if you will) that tends to multiply its effect over time and drag the organization down.

Here’s a relatively simple example from a company where I worked years ago. This particular company had several campuses and “satellite” buildings. In one of these buildings, personal safety equipment, specifically eye and hearing protection, was required. The people who worked in this building were highly skilled and essential to the business. At some point, one of the workers in this building decided to stop wearing his required safety equipment. Soon others began to follow his example. This one individual was having an anti-synergistic effect on the entire group of operators in that area. By his example, he was in effect encouraging others to forgo using needed safety equipment.

When something like this happens, the leadership of an organization has two choices. It can look the other way and hope that the problem will correct itself and further problems won’t arise, or it can act to stop the problem in its tracks. Often, leaders will take the first approach. But as in this example, what usually happens is the problem becomes magnified as more and more people start to behave in the unacceptable way. They see one person “getting away with it” and can then justify doing the same thing themselves.

In this particular case, the problem employee was essential to the business and one could say that fact put leadership

“between a rock and a hard place.” But there are times when it’s appropriate to take a risk in order to rectify a problem. My boss and I went to that building and called in one of the people who was refusing to use protective equipment. We told him “If you leave this room and go back out on the floor without your hearing and eye protection, you can keep walking.” This was a tough call to make, because had he kept walking, his loss would have had a significant impact on the business. But what my boss recognized is that he had to take a stand and stop the anti-synergy in its tracks or he would be opening up the organization to all sorts of additional problems. Ignoring the problem was simply the first step on a slippery slope.

Sometimes they rationalize the inaction by thinking that the problem, person or situation will eventually be “dragged along” with everyone else. They’ll eventually see the light or the right thing if you just give them enough time. The truth is that the sooner an organization can deal with a problem, person or situation, the better that organization will ultimately perform.

As my boss proved that day, you must stand up for what’s important, even if—as in this case—it might hurt you in the short term. Letting bad things go unchecked will ultimately lead to a culture that’s anti-synergistic, and that’s the opposite of what an organization should be seeking.

Allowing one operator to refuse to wear protective equipment sent the message to everyone that not following the rules was okay. Consider the situation where one person refuses to follow 5S or standard work. What does that do to productivity and, more importantly, morale? What does it say about your culture? What sort of message is it sending to the rest of the organization?

It’s never easy to confront a person who is refusing to cooperate, but it doesn’t get any easier if you choose to ignore it and hope it will go away. In fact, delaying action allows anti-synergy to take hold, and before you know it, what was potentially a small problem (i.e., one person) will soon become a much larger one. If you consistently address issues early on, before anti-synergy can rear its head, you will enable your company to maintain a culture that’s consistent with a lean organization. You will also dramatically increase the speed at which your positive culture change, and your lean journey, will take place. ■