Anomalies Of "Things People"

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"If you begin getting complaints from co-workers, supervisors, and customers, you may have a things person in a job where more of their weaknesses are showing up then their strengths."

An old friend used to say that the manufacturing world is divided into three kinds of people: "People people," who like and seek feedback from others, "ideas people," who get a big bang out of new ideas, and "things people," who identify with and prefer things rather than people.

Although I have met many wonderful ideas people, and people people, I have spent most of my career working with and attempting to understand and manage things people. Things people are often machinists, scientists, engineers, accountants, programmers, technicians, and other folks who are excellent at solving quantitative problems but have problems with people and qualitative problems. They are "black and white," analytical people who must operate in the analog, mishmash of our dynamic world of business. Manufacturing by its very nature uses a large number of technical people to get the job done and there is a much higher

percentage of things people in manufacturing then in other industries. Here are some personal examples:

Understand Employee Skill Types

It is difficult to say why these things happen, but permit me a few generalizations: First, things people are usually introverts who are not comfortable with people and prefer to interface with things (e.g. computers) or with other things people. They often have a very hard time with customers (those people who can say whatever they want because they sign the checks), and they often confuse constructive criticism with personal criticism. They tend to avoid confrontation and direct communication with people and prefer to hide behind voice mail systems and other "thing" technologies. I once met a service engineer who was in charge of quality at a high tech company who told me he could not fix quality problems and talk to people on the phone too.

The biggest shortcoming of things people is that they have trouble relating to or communicating with people;
things people often don't enjoy talking to other people who are upset and do not give good black and white answers. So the situation requires the patience to interview the customer or colleague, and piece together the pieces of the problem and come up with the best answer.

The second big problem is when the things person simply doesn't hear what others say or ignores it and tries to impose a digital solution to solve the problem. In this case the service tech is relying on his vast technical knowledge which is obviously superior to any customer. Trying to solve problems without really listening to the user is what I loosely call "the mind reading approach." Mind readers are those omniscient things people who claim to know what others need without asking, listening, or seeing them. It is easier for the mind reader to simply decide the solution rather then wasting a lot of time listening to the customer go on and on with a "stream of consciousness" explanation of the problems.

How To Best Utilize Things People

Now some of these things people are very bright and are very good at technical things and in work that doesn't require supervising other people. But I have found that many things people end up on layoff lists, even when they have the skills to do the job, or perhaps are even smarter or more qualified than their associates.

What to do with things people?

- Always try to get things people into positions where more of their technical strengths show up than their people weaknesses.
- Things people are not always the best candidates for sales or customer contact jobs, so be careful about sticking them in customer contact jobs even if they think they are qualified.
- If you have a things person in a customer contact job you can avoid the

problems of mind reading by getting them out into the field (usually with an interpreter) so they can experience the customer's reality. Forcing them into a situation where they have to empathize with the customer's problems often makes them see the customer in a new light.
- If you suspect "mind reading" is a part of your customer service problems, ask a third party to interview unhappy customers to ensure you are getting an accurate and unbiased assessment of their problems.
- Be careful about assigning management responsibilities if they really just want to handle things. Supervision is handling and solving people problems, and things people usually need good structure and assistance to succeed.
- If the things person has a job that requires a lot of people contact be careful about giving them technology toys to play with. For instance, things people would most likely rather spend hours trying to find the origin of a general protection fault in Microsoft software than call customers.

This story does not intend to convey the point that manufacturing only has the two extremes of things people and people people. On the scale of 1 to 100 perhaps most employees fit in the middle of the range and have a good balance of things and people skills. These people are much easier to promote or to advance into other jobs. Still, manufacturing by its very nature has a high percentage of technical people and some of them are closer to the left side of the scale. But, if you begin getting complaints from co-workers, supervisors, and customers, you may have a things person in a job where more of their weaknesses are showing up then their strengths.

Mike Collins is the author of Saving American Manufacturing, a comprehensive step-by-step strategy that demonstrates how to ultimately become an organization that will continually find new opportunities in today's fast-changing global environment.

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