

BY SUE GIBSON / EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Institutional blindness

Running "lean and mean" has a different meaning for each of you, but the one thing you have in common is a unique way of operating. In fact, some of your systems might even qualify as "crazy" to outsiders, but they work for you, right? Or do they? Maybe it's time to look at your system from the outside.

That's what Toyota does. *The Wall Street Journal* recently profiled a Toyota efficiency expert who makes sure American parts manufacturers' systems can produce parts meeting Toyota's high quality standards. Inevitably, this expert solves quality problems by correcting inefficient, costly production systems. Sometimes, his solutions are remarkably simple.

One firm he visited claimed to have a "state-of-the-art" process. The managers and workers in this company probably congratulated themselves many times over on their high-tech equipment and streamlined methods.

But what the expert saw was a system functioning well midweek and faltering on Monday and Friday. It encouraged waste and allowed costly inventory to clog the plant. Managers thought their system worked because they met their weekly numbers, but Toyota's expert wanted consistent, daily high levels of quality.

A real eye-opener

His simple suggestions opened the Americans' eyes and they were able to see that their "streamlined" system was actually uneven, wasteful and costly.

In another example, the expert showed managers of a highly mechanized painting line that a simple consumer hairdryer dried paint more quickly than their million-dollar robotic masterpiece. The company eventually dumbed down the system, scrapping robots for hand-

held sprayers, while saving money and increasing quality.

Would a fresh look at your operating systems help you improve your bottom line? How would your system look to an outsider — too complicated, too labor intensive, too inefficient?

Are you seeing any danger signs that your systems are failing, such as:

- ▶ a rise in customer complaints,
- ▶ an increase in employee resignations,
- ▶ too much new business and customer contact backlog,
- ▶ unfinished or substandard work done on site, or
- ▶ confusion finding any documents or people.

These are the obvious indicators. An eventual drop in long-time customers or employees, lower margins or profits or a rash of mistakes, breakdowns or man-made calamities are long-term indicators of trouble.

Even though you're well into the busiest time of the year, take time to look at your systems with an unbiased attitude. It will be hard to get honest answers from employees, so look for a qualified outsider who is knowledgeable about systems in general, service businesses or landscape operations. Encourage them to challenge your reasons for doing things and don't be defensive. There's probably gold in those questions because you'll uncover organizational weaknesses sooner, rather than later.

For more ideas on how to add a little productivity or efficiency to your efforts, read our cover story by Jason Stahl on page 26, "Squeeze more out of your time."

Contact Sue at 440/891-2729 or e-mail at sgibson@advanstar.com

Would a fresh look at your operating systems help you improve your bottom line? How would your system look to an outsider?

