



Opening Our Eyes

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

I am a student of lean thinking principles. One concept used early in any lean exercise is to create a Process Flow Map. The map is a very specific diagram of what is actually going on in a process. The experts call this "learning to see." It is effective because without the tool we get lulled into a state where we are looking at things and events, but not really paying attention to what is going on. We look, but we do not see what is important.

I believe this phenomenon is going on a lot more than we recognize. That is why the concept of the "sacred cow" can be so useful to groups at work. A literal sacred cow in the Hindu religion is an actual cow that is treated with sincere reverence. A figurative sacred cow is a practice or act that is immune from question or criticism, especially unreasonably so. An example of a "sacred cow" is sitting up watching a lighted crystal ball slide down a pole on top of a building in Times Square every December 31st at the stroke of midnight. Most of us just do this every year and never stop to ask why. The scary thing is that we are surrounded by sacred cows in the workplace, yet we are blind to many of them because of the nature of the beast.

I was once part of a production operation that created a cow pasture in the form of a bulletin board on which anyone could write what he or she thought was a practice that had no merit on a construction paper cut-out of a cow and place it in the pasture on the bulletin board. This action had the effect of bringing a ridiculous or unwarranted practice to light so it could be eliminated. It was really a process of opening our eyes to see what was really happening. I suggest that every office and organization have a kind of contest to see who can identify the most sacred cows. The only additional rule needed is that the individuals who point out the sacred cows also have to suggest an alternate, more sensible, practice.

A close cousin to sacred cows is a phenomenon called "The Abilene Paradox." The term was invented and presented by Jerry B. Harvey in 1974 in an article in "Organization Dynamics Journal." Jerry described a situation where a family took a road trip to Abilene for dinner on a blistering day in Texas when none of the individuals really wanted to go. Each person rode in the car with no air conditioning because he or

she assumed the others wanted to go. In effect, the group was incapable of seeing that every single person was against the idea, so they all went on the journey. Today we call that phenomenon "groupthink" or another term, "tunnel vision."

It is easy to see our government making groupthink decisions on spending that everyone admits we cannot afford. In order to get re-elected, it is necessary to avoid unpleasant decisions, so the group, en-masse, will pass an appropriation that none of them individually think is good for the country.

The terms "sacred cow" and "groupthink" describe situations where individuals or groups are simply incapable of seeing what, in fact, is true. Why are these terms helpful? They help us because when the paradox is revealed to a group or individual, it is often easier to end the deception. Using the terms in meetings or social interfaces allows people to actually see what is going on much the same way as a Process Flow Map. I believe getting people to use these words in public is cleansing, because it allows a more healthy debate once the denial of a habit is exposed.

Breaking out of old patterns is more difficult than it seems. If you really work at it, you can find examples of groupthink within every group. Giving the actions a name and discussing them openly allows people to catch themselves when they are on the road to Abilene, so they can break the paradigm. Encourage and reward people who are perceptive enough to see and expose the habitual time wasters or just plain dumb things that go on in every organization every day. Take positive steps to put your sacred cows out to pasture.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He can be reached at bwhipple@leadergrow.com 585-392-7763. Website www.leadergrow.com BLOG www.thetrustambassador.com He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*

