Benchmarking: The Speck of Sawdust in Your Brother's Eye

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It’s an old adage, but it very much applies to benchmarking. An independent source will always see more issues than someone stuck inside the forest. The problem has nothing to do with intelligence, experience, or education, but rather a psychological issue called mental scotoma.

Scotoma simply means “blind spot” and this affliction — mental scotoma — is very common. I guarantee it happens to everyone. Let me give you an example to prove it.

Your friends invite you to the new house they just bought. Obviously, even though you have known them for years, you have never set foot in their home. As luck would have it, the hostess asks you to go into the kitchen and retrieve the salt shaker she left behind. How do you know where the salt is? Why did she give you this assignment? You begin to search and search, and finally your hostess appears. When you tell her that you can’t find the salt shaker, she looks at you like you are from Mars and picks up the salt sitting right in front of you!

Mental scotoma happens when you have strongly held rules and regulations or past successes that block your vision to your current situation or the future you want to achieve. A trained benchmarking outsider with a different perspective will always be able to see what you have been missing. The question is: will you be receptive?

Munro is a successful benchmarking agent, but our customers are very successful because they made it past the mental roadblock of seeing what they have always seen and thinking different than ever before. The mental hurdle is the toughest. As you look at your product — “your baby”— everyday, it just gets cuter. You then begin to think people are just dumb for not buying and loving your wonderful product the way you do. Then you hire a benchmarking company. These experts remove the veil and you get an eyeful of ugly. It’s tough.

Many successful companies have turned to an outside organization for what Dr. Ed Deming has called “profound knowledge.” Since most companies and industries become myopic because of shared paradigms, they need someone to shake up their thinking, get them to question the old ways, and to bring new ideas, approaches, and technologies that have worked in other companies and other industries.

This outside perspective is crucial in guiding a company through the inevitable doubts and rough spots, and in keeping them from reverting back to old, more

comfortable ways. The strategic executive can make his or her own luck by keeping a couple of four-leaf clovers with them throughout their campaign:

The crucial ingredients for success:

1. True management commitment, not just contribution;
2. Early involvement — at the concept stage;
3. A multi-disciplinary team that includes shop floor operators as they have the most product knowledge and yet are often the most underutilized company resource; and
4. Analytical approaches — so decisions are made based on data and numbers, not emotions.

The second four-leaf clover is called the “4Ts:”

1. Teamwork — is the difference between good and bad designs. A focused, committed team will outperform a group of individuals with more technology, but less focus every time;
2. Timing — extra time must be allotted at the design stage. In the end, you will save time by doing things right the first time and probably gain a product generation advantage over the competition;
3. Training — People will not think in new ways or use new rules without training. Training helps people discover the limitations they have put on their own creativity. And it helps the team to see the product and the processes in the new and different perspective that is needed to create a breakthrough design; and
4. Tools — There are several analytical tools and computer methodologies available to provide teams with the data they need to make wise choices.

The tools include such various approaches like: QFD (quality function deployment), Pugh Analysis, Munro MAP3™, COQ (cost of quality), 6 Sigma, FMEA (failure modes and effects analysis), and DTC (design to cost). Teams should benchmark tools rather than using those most readily available. For maximum advantage, teams should pick the tools and approaches that best fit their specific needs.

Tools are important, but remember: they are only tools. Thinking that tools will solve all your problems is like starting up a chainsaw and throwing it into the woods and expecting finished 2x4’s to come out.

What’s your take? Please feel free to comment below! For more information, please visit www.leandesign.com *[1].*

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