

TechHumans Blog

Exploring the Human Side of Technical Work

by Keith R. Bennett

Kaizen and Radical Helpfulness

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Context

I recently spent two days with other students in a Kanban class (see Wikipedia's definition of kanban [here](#). An effective kanban system minimizes the degree to which any part of the process needs to wait for input from its predecessor (called blocking), and maximize task completion. Loosely associated with kanban is kaizen, which, in the western business world, signifies a process of continually improving operations based on feedback and experimentation from people at all levels of an organization. Ice Cream

During the mid-afternoon break on the second day we were invited to go next door for free ice cream (!). I arrived to find a substantial line. (Backlog!) The process was quite inefficient. Each "customer" stepped up to the ice cream bar, took a scoop from a metal container filled with water, scooped his or her ice cream, and returned the scoop to the metal container. Making matters worse, the ice cream bar was located in a place that was ill-suited for this flow, so entering and exiting the scooping area made it take even more time.

Seeing this, Sam the kitchen manager came over and offered "I can do this for you much more quickly." Strangely, the person about to scoop ice cream ignored him. He may not have heard Sam. The second person also ignored Sam. I was the third person, and I enthusiastically gave him my bowl and said "Go for it!"

It must have been frustrating for Sam watching us flounder like that because when he finally got the go-ahead from me, he dove for the scoops. Like a sheriff in the wild west picking up his six shooters, he lunged toward the metal container, grabbed one scoop in each hand, and plunged them in two ice cream tubs at the same time. Then he did it again with the other two scoops and tubs. Hmmm, there were four scoops and four tubs, what a fortunate coincidence (not!). This was a brilliant application of kaizen. I was pretty excited to share this story with the class, and eventually had my chance.

After relating my story, Ken, the instructor offered his own. I'm paraphrasing, but basically he said "Did you notice that yesterday and today, the lunch line was really long, and it took forever for some people to get their lunch? The lunch table was placed against the wall so that only one line could pass. From a throughput point of view, that's the worst place it possibly could have been."

Doh!!! Epic fail! We could have halved the time it took to get lunch (which felt like 15–20 minutes for some) by merely sliding the table over a few feet. We like to think of ourselves as pretty smart, but sometimes, um, not so much.

So I thought to myself (cough, retrospective, cough), why did this happen? Why, in a room full of professionals, many of us engineers no less, did no one think of this? Here are some possible answers.

Not My Job

It is common for us to assume rigid lines bounding our responsibilities, and focus our energies inside those lines. This is, after all, the basis on which our value is judged; no one ever got a raise or promotion by picking up someone else's garbage. And while there is a legitimate weight for this, in its extreme it is selfish.

Fear of Embarrassment or Rejection

What if I make a suggestion and it turns out to be a silly one? Or what if the person responsible would be angry if I moved the table, saying that I should mind my own business?

Laziness

If I just wait my turn, I can avoid the effort of embarking on this mental journey to solve the problem, and avoid the social effort required to enlist the support or permission of others.

Low Self Image

I'm not good enough to figure out a solution to this problem, so I won't bother trying.

It Didn't Occur to Me

Most likely, it doesn't even occur to me to try to solve the problem.

It Was Where It Needed to Be

Of course, there's always the possibility that this alternative had already been considered and rejected for good reason. I've found that sometimes when I'm sure I know better, I don't — and that's another opportunity for growth, but outside the scope of this article.

The Toronto Hotel Fire Alarm

I attended a conference in Toronto a few years back, and a false fire alarm sent everyone out into the street. There were probably a hundred people waiting a pretty long time for the hotel to call us back in. Two parents and their children were standing there in their swimsuits, obviously quite cold. I found a hotel employee, pointed to the family, and said "those folks look pretty cold, is there anything we could do for them, maybe get them some towels?" A couple of minutes later they had towels around their shoulders and smiles of relief on their faces. Though I may be projecting, it occurred to me that they were happy not only to be warm, but from the nice feeling that we get when we receive (or give) help.

Why wasn't the hotel staff scanning the crowd to see how they could make their customers more comfortable? And why didn't it occur to the parents to ask for help? Sometimes the best window into ourselves is that which we notice in others. What would I find if I examined my mind to see if I share those self-imposed limitations? How can I train myself to go beyond them?

At one of my employment positions, I noticed that the procurement process was dismally broken. The system we had in place was this: When you run out of stuff, go to the store and buy it. No inventory. One time a presentation to a potential customer almost didn't happen because a blank CD couldn't be found, and someone had to race out to the store to get one in time.

I remembered the admonition not to complain about a problem without proposing a solution, so I put together an email message outlining a system I thought would work well for us. I sent it to the guy in charge.

In contrast to my polite and respectful tone, he replied with what was probably the most vitriolic email message I've received in my entire career. He accused me of inventing fictitious problems, and told me to mind my own business and stick to software development. (My coworkers confirmed my statements.)

Given reactions like this, is it any wonder that so many of us do just that, mind our own business, ignoring opportunities to further the collective goals?

This is why it's so important for a work group, department, or organization to show by their actions (words are good, but by themselves not enough) that they require respect and fair play; otherwise, how can they complain if their people lack initiative?

How the California Highway Patrol Saved My Life

It was late at night a few years ago, and I was driving from San Francisco to my friend's place about an hour outside of the city. I was getting sleepy. Suddenly I heard a siren, and noticed flashing lights in my rear view mirror. I pulled over. The highway patrolmen told me I had been weaving, and asked if I had been drinking. I hadn't. Since I had no recollection of weaving, or anything, before being pulled over I'm pretty sure I was asleep. If I hadn't been stopped, I might have died that night.

How did they know, was it coincidence? Did they just happen to be driving near me? Since then I learned that anyone can call #77 and be connected with the local or state police appropriate to that location. It's possible that a good Samaritan saw me and notified the authorities.

Since then I have called #77 many times, once for a car fire, several times when people were weaving (including trucks!), and many times when I encountered a road hazard such as a box on the highway.

Is it my job to do so? Not really, but how boring would my life be if I only did things I had to do? And besides, what nobler thing could I possibly do with my life than save another's?

Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman

In the book "Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman", the great physicist Richard Feynman relates (among other things) his experiences as a child working at a hotel run by his aunt on the beach. His playful uber-geeky brilliance is a fun read as he relates his incessant ill-fated attempts at process improvement at the hotel and the angry reactions of his elders. In his defense, it would be unfair to judge his inventions by the very first iterations of them, and he didn't get the opportunity to refine them. You can read this online at pp. 25–30 of the book (go to <http://books.google.com> and search for "Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman").

Extending this Principle to the Broader Human Experience

The lack of initiative so often found damages productivity in the workplace, but if we extend it to the broader human experience, we can see that much suffering has occurred due to apathy and selfishness. Edmund Burke said "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." It is natural for us to think of ourselves and our families first, our wider groups and nations next, and "the rest of the world" last. We're wired that way. But it would also be prudent, helpful, and good to acknowledge how much damage and suffering that self-centeredness has caused, and work to mitigate it.

Conclusion

Gerald Weinberg says in his book "The Second Law of Consulting" that "No matter how it looks at first, it's always a people problem." We want to be part of the solution, not the problem, right? So here are some questions we can all ask ourselves:

- Do I care enough to go out of my way to help my coworker, even when that is outside the scope of my measured (rewarded) performance?
- Do I actively seek opportunities to be helpful?
- When someone makes a suggestion to me, do I give it serious consideration? Do I feel grateful for the suggestion? If not, why not? Do I communicate that gratitude to the other person?
- If I have authority over others, how do I respond when they make suggestions that differ from my own ideas and opinions?
- Do I feel happy or envious when a coworker is recognized for excellence?
- If everyone behaved as I do, would my organization be a better or worse place? In what ways?
- Do I monitor my thoughts and actions and notice when there is need for improvement? If so, do I make an effort to correct myself?
- Do I ask myself what am I not thinking or doing that I should be (as described in the Toronto Hotel story)?

What other questions would you add to this list?

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