



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

November 2013 – Issue 52

Froot Loops Leadership

By Meg Weber

Until recently I viewed Froot Loops as one of the cereals my son keeps in the cabinet that I personally would never eat. But just lately, they gave me unexpected management insights. Here's how.

For the past five years, members of our staff have had an annual service day. We go to the Northern Illinois Food Bank to volunteer. The food bank is a distributor to soup kitchens and other programs in the Chicago area. In the 13 counties it serves, many people are not covered by any government program. The majority of the recipients of the food are children and the elderly. It is a volunteer experience that makes us all feel good.

Each year we have had different assignments at the food bank. This year it was repackaging Froot Loops. Kellogg donates 700-pound bags that need to be put into people-sized bags. That's a lot of loops! An employee of the food bank assigned us to different stations in a clean room, turned on the rock and roll music, and mainly left us to our own work. The jobs were: bin fillers (from the 700-pound bags to smaller flat bins), bag scoopers (from bin to cereal box size bag), sealers, and one crate loader with the finished product.

It was a "three-hour tour," meaning no matter how fast, slow or productive we were, we'd be on assignment in the clean room. Any contribution we made would be good for the community. There was no performance evaluation—no rewards, punishments or metrics—to show how well we repackaged Froot Loops versus prior volunteer groups. There was no reason to do anything other than plug away as instructed.

That is not what happened.

Almost immediately there were grassroots process improvements.

- The bin fillers realized waiting until the bins were nearly empty made it hard for the people scooping to fill bags. They kept the bins overflowing with loops.
- Two scoopers calibrated their scoop amounts and number of scoops to closer approximate the designated weight for the bag.

- Two scoopers used teamwork. One started bags with a larger scoop and the other finished with a small scoop.
- One scooper used a fast and furious sideways scooping method.
- And the sealers recommended less weighty bags. Less full bags were much easier to seal.
- Why bother to improve in a situation that lacked rewards?

At first I was reminded of this story from *The Ancestor's Tale* by Richard Dawkins:

... I have seen a remarkable film of captive beavers imprisoned in a bare, unfurnished cage, with no water and no wood. The beavers enacted, "in a vacuum," all the stereotyped movements normally seen in natural building behaviour when there is real wood and real water. They seem to be placing virtual wood into a virtual dam wall, pathetically trying to build a ghost wall with ghost sticks, all on the hard, dry, flat floor of their prison. One feels sorry for them: it is as if they are desperate to exercise their frustrated dam-building clockwork.



Meg Weber is director of Section Services at the Society of Actuaries. She can be reached at mweber@soa.org.

Almost immediately there were grassroots process improvements.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 30

It was a supportive environment for experimenting. While there was no reward for doing better, there was no punishment for doing worse.

Was it that? Our room conditions were pretty similar to the beavers' (though the beavers did not have to wear gloves and hair nets). Did we come up with improvements because we're hard wired to do so?

Perhaps, but with all seriousness, I propose the following reasons:

- Everyone understood our overall mission (feeding people). We bought in, even though we had no control over what our specific assignment might be.
- Everyone was treated as valuable. There was no hierarchy for the people or the tasks.
- Froot Loops are amusing. The large bags were funny to look at. It was Costco on steroids. In hair nets, we were also amusing and funny looking.
- It was a supportive environment for experimenting. While there was no reward for doing better, there was no punishment for doing worse. A couple of small bags got dumped on the floor, and the "consequence" was to clean up and move on.
- We were treated with trust and encouragement. The food bank employee often left the room

with all of us stuffing away. In the end we packed close to 1,000 pounds of Froot Loops.

So what can I use from this experience as a manager? No, as tempting as the thought is, it can't be used as a new job applicant test for initiative. But it can help me set up an environment for certain tasks. If I want my team (and myself) to generate creative ideas, I will:

- Provide sufficient space with few distractions. (Did I mention, no cell phones in the clean room?)
- Provide enough time to digest concepts and think. Some of the time needs to be unfocused, fun and relaxing, yet active and engaged. Move closer to the problem versus diving in the deep end.
- Treat everyone as trustworthy sources of ideas. Not all ideas will get adopted as the "best practice," but they all have merit.

And, finally, I will try to remember that Froot Loops are supposed to be a great source of fiber, although I am no more likely to eat them than before this trip to the food bank! ●