

## MONDAY MANNA

6 February 2017

### THE WISDOM OF THE FRONT LINE

By Rick Boxx

A friend of mine, Paul, and some investors launched a new business with a promising new medical product. The product concept was excellent, but when the medical community used this new product, it was not effective because of significant design flaws.

When Paul communicated to his investors that the product needed to be revised, the investors did not accept what their sales people were saying about the design problems. Investors believed the product did not need changes; the sales representatives just had to do a better job of marketing it.

Ultimately, with the business rapidly nearing failure, Paul made one last effort to convince the investor group to allow him to change the design. With great reluctance, the investors finally agreed, and changes were implemented. To the surprise of the investors – but not to Paul – within three months, sales began to soar, losses were averted, and the medical community had a product they were eager to use.

This scenario illustrates a not-uncommon problem in the business and professional world. Individuals at the top levels of leadership and management make critical decisions without consulting front-line workers, whether they are the ones involved in manufacturing the product, those who provide the services, or staff assigned sales and marketing responsibilities. When results fail to come as expected, leaders struggle to understand what went wrong.

Decades ago, significant shifts were started to address this common issue. It began in Japan, where workers were regularly consulted before implementing changes that directly affected their work areas. Interestingly, a catalyst in this change was W. Edwards Deming, an American engineer and management consultant. His many contributions included emphasis on improved service and higher levels of product quality. One of his “14 Points for Management” was, “Put everybody in the company to work to accomplish the transformation. The transformation is everybody’s job.” This led to the development of quality circles and participative management, giving everyone opportunity to provide input into systems and process.

Demings’ approaches were revolutionary for the business world at the time, but his ideas were hardly new. The Bible speaks much about the value of obtaining the advice and perspectives of people with firsthand knowledge. For instance, Proverbs 12:15 teaches, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”

Every day in the workplace we engage in a battle of sorts – a battle against competitors, and a battle to gain the favour of customers and clients. Proverbs 11:14 instructs, “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisors make victory sure.” Another verse similarly observes, “A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength; for waging war you need guidance and for victory many advisors” (Proverbs 24:5-6).

We would be wise never to overlook the wisdom of others in your workplace, especially those closest to your customers, as well as the production processes. They can see – from the front line – things we cannot see from the “ivory tower.”

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## Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been in a situation where problems with product design or service were made known, but corporate leadership was unwilling to make necessary changes? What is the cause for such reluctance when flaws are evident?
2. How can we best overcome such unwillingness to accept recommendations for needed changes?
3. Participative management and quality circles now are concepts that have been in use for many years. What has been your experience with them – if at all?
4. The Bible passages cited speak to the importance of seeking out advice and counsel from people with knowledge and perspectives that apply directly to critical circumstances. How can we go about determining who those advisers should be?

### NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

- Proverbs 12:15, 15:22, 19:20,27, 20:18, 27:17;
- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12