

## Five Monkeys, a Banana, and Corporate Culture

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I have recently took part in a series of ‘mystery shopping’ visits to branches of an international retail network organisation. The purpose of the visits was to appreciate the customer experience, identify consistent negative experiences, and look to turn these round. One of the most common observations was the rigid compliance with procedures and process that create a tragic experience for the customer, and drove them away from the organisation. For example, application forms were rejected because the form was completed in blue ink rather than black, or in regular rather than block capitals. This reminded me of the classical psychological experiment by Harry Harlow of the five monkeys and the hanging banana.

In Harlow’s experiment (which would not pass any ethics committee nowadays), five monkeys were put into a regular monkeys’ cage, with a banana hanging high on a rope from the roof of the cage (outside the reach of the monkeys). The researcher then put a step ladder enabling the monkeys to reach the banana. However, whenever one of the monkeys attempted to climb and reach for the banana, ALL monkeys were sprayed with freezing ice cold water. After few attempts, they all learned the association between reaching for the banana and the group collective punishment of being sprayed with freezing ice cold water. If they want to stay warm and dry, they better not reach for the step ladder. From now on, none of the five monkeys tried to reach for the banana anymore. There was no need for the water treatment from that point on.

At this stage the researcher replaced one of the five monkeys with a new monkey. The new monkey, not aware of the icy water treatment, tried to reach for the banana. Within fraction of a second the other four monkeys pounced on him and beat the hell out of him – again and again, till he stopped and did not try anymore. Note, that icy water treatment was not used anymore. The same process was repeated, one of the four monkeys who experienced the original icy water treatment was replaced by a new one, and again all the four monkeys beat the new monkey to submission. Finally, the cage was populated by five monkeys of whom none have experienced the icy water treatment. The experimenter then introduced a new monkey to the cage. When this monkey tried to reach for the banana, all five monkeys jumped on him and beat the hell out of him. None of these monkeys knew about the collective punishment of icy water, none knew why they are not allowed to get the banana, but somewhat along the way they learnt that reaching for the banana is not allowed. They become the guardians of this rule without knowing its purpose.

The same happens in organisation. A rule, a regulation, or a procedure, is introduced for a reason. However, after a while, the reason for it is forgotten, but the rule, regulation, or procedure stays. Nobody knows why they are following it, but they all do. Take the blue ink – black ink example that results in loss of customers. Sometime in the past, this regulation was introduced, probably because when photocopied or axed, blue ink was not as clear as black ink. However, technology has moved fast since then. Nowadays we have colour photocopiers and the quality of fax is not affected by ink colour. It doesn’t matter anymore if the ink is blue or black, yet the original regulation is still there, resulting in client loss for no real reason.

So next time you work with an organisation that tells you – “sorry, we cannot do that – we have to comply with a regulation that says...” — tell them about the five monkeys and the banana.