People Just Make Mistakes

Why does it seem like some businesses are intentionally trying to dissatisfy their customers? It is unlikely that my following experiences are the only errors their employees have made in the past year. It is more likely that the same or similar types of error are repeated several times a week. Why? Maybe management just accepts the fact that people (employees) just make mistakes.

Three weeks ago I picked up two large pizzas, brought them home, and then discovered that one pizza was not what I ordered. It belonged to another customer. So I had to call the store, have them remake my pizza, and then make another trip to pick it up.   On the first trip to the store my pizzas were not quite ready so I paid for them and then watched an employee take them out of the oven, place them in boxes, and hand them directly to me.   How could one not be mine?

This past weekend I grilled the fresh brats I had been dreaming about for several days. After my second bite I discovered that my brat was stuffed with onions. After checking I confirmed that all of the brats were onion filled. I can't eat onions without getting sick and several of our guests didn't want onions either. I had purchased these brats from a local meat market just a few days earlier. I ordered (plain) brats and the label on the package that I was given said "Homemade Bratwurst." It didn't say anything about onions.

 I do remember that the meat market offers several different types of brats and they are all in different trays, next to each other in the display case, and all on the same upper shelf. The labels on these trays face the customer side of the case but there doesn't appear to be any label on the butcher's side. Maybe the meat market employees are just supposed to remember what sausage product is in each of these similar looking trays.

Knowing that mistakes happen, what steps does your business take to reduce errors and improve customer satisfaction? The concepts of "Lean Manufacturing" address this subject using the term "error- proofing." Error-proofing techniques and tools are simple and easy to apply. The greatest challenge is in discovering the root cause for the error. Then you use your knowledge to effectively eliminate it.

Conventional thinking tends toward identifying the cause of mistakes as "human error." In contrast, the Lean Manufacturing approach starts with the assumption that an error is a failure of the system and methods that are used to perform work. This difference in thinking shifts the responsibility for errors from people to the method being used to perform the work.

The authors of the Toyota Way Fieldbook say that "it is common within Toyota for a manager to apologize to a worker when the worker makes an error, because management bears the responsibility for creating effective systems that prevent mistakes." When was the last time someone in your company apologized to a worker after the worker made a mistake?

If you own or manage a business and your employees make mistakes then you have an opportunity to improve your efficiency and your customer satisfaction. If you would like some help on how to get started on this continuous improvement journey please contact SCORE by placing a call to the Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce office.