

What's Your 49-Cent Solution?

NASA engineers have determined that for less than a \$1, they can purchase a foam paintbrush that astronauts can use in flight to spread patching compound on a damaged heat shield. This discovery – and the Columbia space shuttle tragedy that precipitated it – raises questions that any organization might pause to consider.

1. Are you willing to re-calibrate after the launch? After the enormous effort it takes to get a project off the ground, the instinct is to pop the champagne cork and order takeout. Yet the most significant learning occurs once the initiative is in play and the customer is reacting, the marketplace is watching, the employee is executing. If you don't see glitches, you aren't looking closely enough. Put your sharpest people on this post-launch phase, the creative scrubdown that pinpoints problems and rapidly solves them.

2. Are you relying on history and routines that blind you to real-time risks? A culture of complacency evolves when project schedules supersede real-time insight. As the Associated Press reported on the Columbia inquiry, NASA's culture was marked by "engineers relying too much on past successes and fearing to speak out about safety concerns. Safety checks and balances eroded over time and shuttle managers ended up worrying more about meeting future launch dates...than assessing Columbia's damaged wing."

3. Are you acting on what you learn? The NASA report identified a long-standing culture problem at the agency, one surfaced in countless reports over a number of years. How different is the employee feedback you get year after year? Chances are there's a pattern of frustration around sore spots like communication gaps, disconnects with the organization's mission, and supervisory snafus. Same for your customers...what stream of grumbling can create big hits or major misses for your team? Dig for root causes and attack the real problems.

4. Are you more comfortable with small steps than bold leaps forward? You're not alone. Lacking a renewed mission, NASA faced budget cuts and a waning mandate. Admiral Gehman Jr, the chair of the investigative commission, warned "We need to decide as a nation what we want to do. We shouldn't start by designing the next vehicle. That is a trap that we've fallen into several times."

To learn at the expense of human lives is a painful undertaking. As the philosopher said, "There's only one thing worse than learning from experience. That's not learning from experience."

So right now...think of a project critical to your team's success and ask these four questions with an honest look in the mirror. Every member of the team - up, down and across the org chart - needs to play in. And always with a keen eye for the 49-cent solution, the simple idea right under our noses that might make all the difference.