

Monkeys In A Room

by John P. Mulhall

Let me share a story with you.

When first related to me, this story was framed as if it had happened as an actual sociological experiment. Whether this experiment ever truly occurred or this story exists solely as a parable is uncertain. But regardless, it makes a point.

Five monkeys are placed in a large basement room where they are to be monitored. Within this room are all the luxuries a monkey could desire: a mock jungle environment, an assortment of toys, a tire swing, a wealth of food, and of course, the company of other monkeys.

In the corner of the room are a set of stairs leading up. While the monkeys have almost the entire basement room at their disposal, every time one of them gets near those stairs, it triggers powerful fire hoses that spray all of the monkeys with cold water.

Needless to say, it isn't long before the monkeys learn not to come near the stairs.

Every once in a while, however, one of the monkeys forgets. But before he can even trigger the hoses, the others monkeys jump into action, pulling the forgetful monkey away from the stairs to beat him violently. And then, of course, the forgetful monkey learns his lesson.

After a while, the monkeys have basically taken over the job of the hoses, becoming, in effect, their own police force. The hoses aren't even used any more.

One day, a few months later, one of the monkeys is removed from the room. And replaced with a new monkey. It isn't long before the new monkey tries to explore the stairs. I'm sure you can imagine that the other four monkeys teach him, violently, that the stairs are strictly off limits.

It only take a couple of beatings for the new monkey to fall in line.

Slowly, the other four monkey are replaced, one by one. Each time, the new monkey must be "taught" about the stairs.

Soon, none of the original monkeys remain. And although none of them have ever felt the icy sting of the powerful hoses, none dare approach the stairs.

Why?

Because...

"...we've always done it that way!"

How many times have you heard that reason in your life? So much that it's become a joke, right? So much so that people can't even say it with a straight face anymore, right?

I mean, this parable just illustrates a phrase that has already become a parody of itself, simple and laughable, right? Right?? Anyone?

Sadly, no.

I'm amazed at how surprisingly common this phrase still rears its ugly head in corporate environments, especially in the face of new ideas.

Oh, maybe people aren't saying it in such a direct fashion, but it's there, right beneath the surface. Keep digging, you'll find it.

Marketing departments are used to things that are familiar and have worked for them in the past. Communications departments have "tried and true" methods. Meetings and Events departments grab last years RFP, which of course is based on the previous years...and so on...and so on.

For example, you'd be amazed how many times I hear, almost smugly, "oh, we don't use video."

But why?

Video based advertising is proven to be 20% more effective than other forms!

And online video grew 53% in 2009 alone!

Video is an effective option to communicate.

So why would a company just wholly disregard it, if not for the fact that they have just never used it before, which is basically saying "we've always done it that way!"

I'll tell you this. Many other businesses are certainly discovering video. And they are utilizing social media. And they are looking at other unique, creative, and perhaps (dare I say it) untried methods of communicating their message. They are opening their minds to the myriad of possibilities that exist to help them reach their audience.

We are in a time of flux. And the old playbook isn't really cutting it anymore. I'm not saying you should discard it completely, because that would be counter-productive, but I am saying that it's time to start asking "why?"

"Why?" is courageous. "Why?" is bold. And yes "Why?" can be scary as well, but we are in a time where asking "Why?" is the responsible thing to do.

Question the reasoning behind policies, and figure out alternatives, because you may discover new avenues that help you grow your business...or alternate paths that will save your company money...or you may find you can eliminate costly programs altogether.

So, I say you should ask "Why?" with the persistence of a 3 year old. You may just uncover that the only answer is under all the layers is "we've always done it that way!"

And then you'll know it's time to start anew.

Because I think we can all agree, none of us just want to be monkeys in a room.