

Can Use of a “Casual Observer” Strategy Help Improve Distribution Operations?

totes Isotoner’s Doug Baker Uses Technique to Provide a Fresh Perspective on Logistics Issues

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Many times, even very knowledgeable managers and operators in a given functional area or process can be constrained in how they look at a problem by that very experience.

To help address that scenario and look for fresh ideas to a given challenge or opportunity, **Doug Baker**, Vice President of Operations for totes Isotoner in Cincinnati, deploys what he terms a “casual observer” strategy when his team is trying to make some decisions.

It works like this: say the team and managers are trying to make improvements in an area like receiving operations. Baker will bring someone in who is knowledgeable about distribution generally, but who does not know the details of the current receiving process or strategies.

As the issues are discussed, he asks this “casual observer” to simply listen to the discussion for awhile and maybe ask few questions. At the appropriate time, he’ll then ask the observer to comment on the discussion, and offer any perspective or insight that they may have from an outside perspective.

“People directly involved can sometimes be too close to a process,” Baker says. “Sometimes there is an answer staring you right in the face, but your history prevents you from seeing the solution.”

Baker said the approach really paid off a few years ago, when the team was grappling with some issues related to product slotting in the split case pick area of totes Isotoner’s distribution center.

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After a “casual observer” listened to the discussion, he asked a very basic question trying to understand why the current slotting strategy was designed as it was. It turned out that question led the team to look at the problem in a whole new way, without some of the existing assumptions about how the slotting needed to be approached. That ultimately led to a breakthrough change in slotting strategy.

“The casual observer approach has served us well for many years,” Baker added. “It’s almost always beneficial to get an outside perspective from someone who is knowledgeable enough about your company and logistics to have some context, but not be constrained in the way they might look at the issue from their history.”

The low-cost approach “has had a very high ROI,” Baker says.