Behavioral Changes Alone Won't Help You Improve Your Commercial Energy Efficiency

Groan….At first I was pretty excited about the business opportunity. A large school district wanted us to help them reduce their energy consumption. It was a large opportunity (15 – 20 schools) and on the surface would be a great project. Not only would it provide our company a good bit of business, was for a local project so we were personally motivated.

Unfortunately, we had to tell them we were not the right company to help them.

Why did we pass up the project?

Mainly because they were setting up the project for failure. All commercial energy efficiency measures had to be based on behavioral changes. They would not consider any commercial energy efficiency measures that required equipment changes or upgrades.

Don't get me wrong, successful energy management requires buy in from senior management, and if you can change the culture of a company to be energy conscious, it can have a profound effect. The problem is that when you only look at behavioral changes, human nature gets in the way. In fact, I usually recommend that companies and organizations automate whenever possible to remove the human factor. It isn't that most employees are incompetent or that they love wasting energy. They just quickly forget to turn off lights when they leave the room. When they work late they forget to turn up the thermostat before they go home. In their rush to get to their lunch or smoke break, to sleep with the [pillow for sitting up in bed](#), they forget to turn off their equipment.

In other words, they focus on what they get paid for…doing their job!

In fact, studies have been done on energy conservation and how long the savings last. What they find is that almost all of the energy savings are lost within three years unless measures are put in place (for example, power management systems, hiring a VP of Sustainability, etc…).

This is why I cringe when I see organizations request a commercial energy audit without allowing capital projects, equipment upgrades, or equipment installation.

Don't get me wrong, behavioral changes are important.

I'm a firm believer that successful energy management requires executive support and leadership. I believe firmly in getting everyone in a company involved in their commercial energy efficiency programs. But companies want employees who are good at their jobs, not employees that are environmentally conscious!

Companies are usually better off investing in automation that removes the human element than on educational or other behavioral programs.

So why do some organizations eliminate capitol projects, equipment changes, etc…from consideration?

In my experience it comes down to two reasons:

1. They are doing this for philosophical reasons. They don't want to minimize the energy consumption of their organization, they want to *educate* their employees and make them *better citizens*. The problem with this is that the purpose of a company is to make money, not enact social change. It is great if they can do good while making money, but their primary purpose needs to focus on maximizing profits.

2. They don't want to spend any money. Yep, they are either broke or cheap. Ok, that was a bit harsh and over the top. It is important to evaluate projects and make decisions based on risk and reward. It is always important to schedule projects based on available cash. But good companies then freely spend money when it makes sense (high ROI and low risk).

Successful energy audits and successful energy management require capitol projects, equipment upgrades, **and** behavioral changes. It is like a three legged stool: if you remove any leg (ie…requiring only commercial energy efficiency measures) the stool collapses.

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