

Quality Onion Style

Quality and the intrigue of the onion syndrome. How what could be happening and what should be happening created a new mindset for me. David Edis-Bates November 2010

Trust and particularly a lack of trust creates a culture in Chinese manufacturing where family, guanxi and classmate connections pervade the organisation in many situations. This, to my mind, is the key to understanding how quality issues in China may often not turn out to be what was expected, peeling back the onion skin may reveal hidden agendas.

Employing family and “friends” is one way that potentially limits the risk of outsiders damaging the business. Which can result in less than the best being employed but could create a perceived level of control and marginally increased trust. When buying decisions are made a major danger is that “Uncle” Lee only buys from his family connections or “friends”.

So when “Uncle” Lee’s “friend” delivers defective parts or assemblies the machinations that develop can be legion with what appears to be contorted reasoning to find some way of accepting or “mending” the offending items. And as for changing the supplier after several unsatisfactory deliveries,

well the mind boggles as to the explanations that can be generated as to why the supplier should remain on the “approved supplier list”.

Another significant feature is that Chinese factory labour has a low incremental cost per hour as significant costs are involved in providing accommodation and food etc and usually little or no overtime is paid whereas materials can be expensive and have a direct cost to the business. So rework is usually the preferred option despite at first sight it seems a very costly and unproductive and maybe inelegant solution to what appears to be a very simple problem.

We’ve found that buying components and parts direct from suppliers and arranging assembly by others creates rewards in improved quality in some areas.

Awareness of the cultural issues hopefully also improves our understanding of the pitfalls and results in fewer tears when peeling back the onion layers.

About the Author

David Edis-Bates C.Eng MIET, a chartered engineer who first visited China in the 70’s lived in Taiwan for 4 years and in China for the past 5 years is currently CEO of Edis Trading (HK) Limited <http://www.edisav.com> **[More.... Tips and Articles from EdisAV](#)**