

MetaManagement Communicator

MetaMatrix Consulting Group, LLC.
Consulting & Speaking Services

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Article This Issue:

QUALITY CONTROL: How True
Are Subjective Measures

KEEPING COMPETITIVE:
Eliminating Time Wasters
While Adding Value

Information created to inform, educate and prepare management to lead

QUALITY CONTROL: How True Are Subjective Measures?

Moving at rapid speed, an employee of a large transportation firm reviewed the manual used for customer service and operations by flipping through a 4-inch book, removing one page and inserting another every 50-100 pages. His function: quality control.

After some discussion, he explained that on a rotation basis his role was to upgrade the manuals and make reviews of the employees. The reviews involved everything from cleanliness to operational standards and customer service. Upon further conversation, I found out that doing such a job is very positive for one's career, because by taking the initiative, he is up for more promotions and eventually the ability to select the job he would prefer to have in the operation.

Seems like a great deal. Do more work...get more pay and the promotion. When asked how he handles a situation where an employee is not working up to par, he responded with a cock of the head and a shy smile that he never gives anyone a bad review. That's just not done in the organization. "You have to understand that if I give a poor review, then there are consequences." Laying out his game, he mentioned that what he does do, however, is make suggestions to employees so that they understand what changes must be made to improve performance. The closer look reveals that the great "deal" is great only for the individual, not for the organization as a whole.

Is this the quality control one would expect from employees or management? Granted the teamwork and coaching are useful, but the stats no longer show the reality of the situation. In this case the employee had to stop reviewing the job performance of the individual and start assisting the same employee in finishing her tasks in the time allotted. If he had not, the job she was to perform would not have been completed on time. Either the job needed to be changed or the employee re-educated.

Outside reviewers who have no stake in the review process can do an excellent job, but what about those who don't? And what is the value of a quality measuring a system/culture that fears or neglects giving accurate feedback on employee performance? Management's job is to get true and sometimes painful information in order to make the best decisions for the organization now and in the future.

Have you reviewed your firm's information gathering and reporting mechanisms recently? When co-workers (including

management and subordinates) like each other, it becomes harder for them to provide honest feedback when performance delivers a low grade. Subjective reporting can also be inaccurate because opinions vary from person to person; one manager may see employees as productive while the next may see the staff as not living up to their potential.

Take these few ideas as building blocks.

1. Begin with the end in mind and share the goal to develop two-way communication from CEO to front line. Too often employees have tunnel vision about their jobs, their departments and their functions and forget why they were originally hired. Show them the end goal and their role in achieving it then keep the message in front of them daily. When proper performance mechanisms are in place, you're more likely to receive honest, accurate feedback.
2. Replace a sizeable portion of the human element with concrete "absolute" mechanisms. Use systems and/or internal benchmarks to measure performance rather than subjective means. This removes bias and reduces apprehension about being honest when the reports are less than stellar.
3. Don't try to reinvent the wheel. There are a lot of books with helpful information on systems and tools. Several deal with the well known system tools such as Six Sigma made popular by Motorola and GE. The Spirit to Serve Marriott's Way addresses how employees and systems are married and so too does Jack: From the Gut by Jack Welch. Take some time to discover what others have already learned
4. Pass it on. Develop systems and provide tools that enable employees to carry forth objectives in an effective, methodical and low-error fashion. Done right, you'll increase morale and profitability.

The quality control individual previously mentioned was working for a major airline. I met him while our plane was in flight. The flight attendant was not able to finish her job prior to landing without the help of this gentleman, who gave her a glorious review. In an industry that has come under scrutiny lately, there is much to be learned from bureaucracy and systems that do not produce with a customer focus. You draw your own conclusions about the impact of service (or product) firms that are not looking for real honest feedback via quality control mechanisms. More importantly, are you controlling quality outcomes, or is something hidden controlling your perception?

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When you welcomed 2002, did you find a noticeable improvement in company-wide quality compared with 2001? Did you take the time to create the strategies and tactics that would enable your organization to be more competitive and more prepared than in years past? Were you able to implement all the progressive changes you thought were necessary? For many small companies January is the time for "cleaning house" and reassessing direction, yet very little time is spent on creating real change in the way business is done very day. Mid to large-size companies are more likely to have already laid the plans for the year and are at the implementation stage requiring new direction. Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, the global economy is rapidly changing and it would be advisable to continually review even the simplest of policies, procedures and systems, in terms of their actual value to the organization and ultimately to the customer. Focus on the small every day functions that cause long term results.

While market conditions change, so must companies. Your product may be the same, but the way in which you deliver it or features of the product should be reviewed, to remain competitive. As a result, operations must keep pace with the current tools of conducting business. With the passing of each year, you may have procedures that are simply performed based on status quo, not due to their current relevance. The question you need to ask is, "What are the policies, programs or functions that no longer have meaning to our customers and/or employees?"

While building a business in the 90's, we would make it a policy to fill in for staff members who were on vacation so that there was an opportunity to do the job of someone else and see it from their perspective over the course of several days. Surprisingly, we often found that we had created policies and procedures that somehow had lost meaning or value to the organization and to the customer. In one frustrating instance, we realized that an employee had been generating copious hand-written forms that had become obsolete. Several months prior, a computer system had been installed that eliminated the need for these forms; the hand-written forms, which were repeated several times a day, ended up in a Never Never Land of dusty file cabinets! It was our own bureaucracy (that was initially intended to improve performance) that had actually decreased performance of a key manager. Sometimes 3-4 hours per day were consumed by these tasks, while the manager's productivity and

management time had been declining in performance.

The point: when developing systems and procedures, we may often be our own worst enemies. Constantly check why procedures and policies exist, and whether they are necessary make them valuable to the customer and the employee. For management this means getting dirty with staff. Sitting down with members of the team and asking yourself why. Why do we do this? Why do we do that? What was the purpose for "this" in the first place and is it still filling the same purposes? Each question builds on longer term solutions and should begin with the functions most closest to your customer.

By taking the time to make such adjustments, you'll likely:

1. Improve the quality of products and services to customers.
2. Build employee and management morale.
3. Uncover new profit centers.
4. Increase productivity and decrease waste.

Assess activities. If they don't result in excellent customer satisfaction, whether through services or products, they are probably unnecessarily draining your resources. Clean house, eliminate waste, focus on value, and watch profits rise. This is a great step in right sizing your firm.

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