

Scrutiny of Process, Not Product, Delivers a Sustainable Quality Gain

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Please take a minute and think about a quality problem you are currently trying to solve. How much time have you spent measuring, complaining about, and attempting to explain the problem? Compare this to the time you have devoted (if any) to analyzing and changing the process that produces the problem. If you are committed to continuous quality improvement, stop staring at results. Focus, instead, on improving the quality of the processes that generate your products and services.

Many quality improvement campaigns fail because they focus on effects while ignoring causes. Management tallies up results, such as inventory turns, defect rates or the number of customer complaints. Incentives are offered for improving the numbers, but little more than minor, one-time victories are realized.

The only way to achieve continuous quality improvement is by continually improving your processes. In the past, we talked about leadership and its role in quality. An important attribute of leadership is process-oriented thinking.

When you visualize your company, do you picture an organization chart, divided by products or functions? It's time to replace that image with a far more powerful and revealing one. Try to envision your company as a network of interdependent processes spanning both organizational and functional boundaries.

These processes can be large or small, simple or complex. For example, installing a jet engine is one of many operations that make up the larger, more complex process of building an airplane. Building and testing the engine itself is a separate, yet interdependent, process.

Process inputs include people, materials, equipment, methods and the environment. Work activities combine or transform these inputs to add value for the customer. Finally, the process generates output in the form of products, services, or both.

What is missing from this process model? For continuous quality improvement, you must obtain feedback on the process from two sources: the process's customers and the process itself. The first feedback loop is the 'voice of the customer.'" By listening to you customers, you can clarify and address their requirements, expectations and satisfaction level, tailoring your

process targets accordingly. Based on customer feedback, you can concentrate your resources and improvement efforts on product or service characteristics vital to customer satisfaction.

Don't overlook feedback from internal customers. Within your organization, every person at every level is both a supplier of a product or service and a customer for the products and services generated by other processes.

The second type of feedback you should be monitoring is the "voice of the process." Listening to the voice of the process means verifying and controlling process capability, parameters, status, variation, targets and outputs. By monitoring and controlling these factors at the process level, you can prevent or quickly circumvent defects, undesirable variation and waste.

In the past, companies have tried to ensure quality after the fact by carefully analyzing their monthly or quarterly operating results to detect problems. But today's high performance companies take a more timely and cost-effective approach. These award-winning organizations prevent quality problems reacting to the valuable feedback provided by the voice of the customer and the voice of the process. Have you been ignoring this vital information?

Paying attention to processes, not just results, will enable you to readily isolate sources of quality problems and opportunities for improvements. For example, many processes exhibit quality variations due to differences in operator skill, experience or technique. Additional training, well-defined targets and fail-safe process designs will help ensure quality.

As you shift your focus from results to processes, keep in mind that your goal is making an entire process work as well as possible, not perfecting individual factors. Focus on tuning up the process so it delivers the customer's definition of a quality product or service. Finally, monitor your progress by measuring improvement to the process, not just the results.