

Improve Collaboration and Communication in Your Office

Willie L. Carter

Many times organizations overlook the importance of collaboration and communication between their administrative departments. Work is completed by one department and “thrown over the wall” to the other department with total disregard for the needs or requirements of the department to whom the work is handed off.

With this type of mindset poor quality documents, information, and data leads to rework and wasted time which ultimately impacts the delivery of services or products to the external customer—“the one who pays the bills.”

Administrative departments need to create a new mindset in which they view downstream departments as their customers because they truly are their internal customers. This approach is remarkably evident if you think of the work you do as a process. In process thinking you receive an input from a supplier which you transform into a product or service for your downstream customer. Your goal as the processor department is to make sure your downstream customer is satisfied every single time.

What Is Process Improvement?

You can delight your customers by providing the “best” possible products or services. Best is defined as meeting or exceeding your customers’ expectations.

You can only provide the “best” product or service by improving the processes that produces them. You do not improve a process by weeding out the good from the defects and errors after a product or service is produced. Instead process improvement is about improving quality, while reducing costs and eliminating waste.

Process improvement typically means making a process more efficient, less costly, more capable of meeting your customers’ requirements, and/or more consistent in producing a value-added output for the customer.

Customers and Suppliers

The concept of customers and suppliers is easily grasped once you understand the idea of a process: the people or departments who precede the series of tasks you identify as a process are “suppliers” and those who follow, who use the product or service, are “customers.” These definitions include customers and suppliers both inside (“internal”) and outside (“external”) the organization.

External customers buy the product, financially supporting the organization; therefore it is important to satisfy these people. Inside the company, employees pass on their work to other employees, who are their internal customers.

Each employee therefore is a *customer* of preceding employees; and each has *customers*, the people to whom the employee passes his or her work.

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You cannot focus solely on the product from the process or the person delivering the service and still be able to deliver quality to your customers. Process excellence is determined by the quality of the inputs and how well each step of the process is performed. Therefore, you must build quality into every step, process, and system in the organization. You must work with internal and external customers to determine their needs, and work in partnership with internal and external suppliers.

The Quality Responsibilities of Every Department

Customer Responsibilities	Processor Responsibilities	Supplier Responsibilities
Convey needs to suppliers	Design and plan the process to meet customer needs	Identify your customers
Give feedback to suppliers	Manage the process to meet customer needs	Be aware of customer needs
Acquire feedback from suppliers	Improve the process based on customer feedback & requirements	Acquire feedback from customers

Process Complexity

The root causes of a problem is sometimes hidden deeply in the procedures and processes used to create a product or service. But even when the original source is hidden, you can usually find the non-value-added activities that were generated in compensating for the problem. These non-value-added activities are complexities—something that makes a process more complicated without adding value to the product or service.

Typically, complexity arises when people repeatedly try to improve a process without an organized plan. Then try to solve one piece by adding or rearranging steps, without realizing they are altering other parts of the process. As the problems from the alteration start to surface, more and more steps are added to compensate. Almost every process includes work that would not be necessary if systems worked perfectly.

The Four Types of Process Complexity

- Errors/Defects—when defects occur in products or services, or an error is made, work has to be repeated and extra steps added to correct the error or dispose of the damage. These steps are complexity because they are non-value-added in the eyes of the customer.
- Delays—when work is waiting for approvals, information or others to complete a task

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- **Waste**—The use of more material, time and movement than absolutely necessary
- **Variation**—disparity in work output typically caused by doing things differently. The lack of standardized methods for completing the work routinely causes variation.

The Steps to Departmental Process Improvement

1. **Define The Department's Mission**—develop a department mission statement that describes the department's work clearly, concisely, and concretely. The statement should be 25 words or less.
2. **Determine The Outputs Of The Department**—develop a list of all the activities carried out in the department and then determine what outputs (product, service, or information) are a result of these activities. Identify the activities that are most closely related to the department's mission.
3. **Prioritize All Products And Services**—create a prioritized list of products produced by the department that are closely related to the department's mission.
4. **Identify The Vital Few Customers Of The Mission Critical Products**—narrow down the list of the department's customer to people or groups significantly impacted by the department's activities—department supervisors and key employees within the customer unit.
5. **Identify Customer Requirements And Express Them Form The Customer's Viewpoint**—conduct interviews of the department's customer (departmental customers are usually internal to the organization).
6. **Translate Customer Needs To The Language Of The Department**—the customer's requirements must be translated into a language the provider department can understand. A key question to ask is: If our customers say they need this, how can we go about providing it?
7. **Establish Quality And Process Metrics**—establish a set of measures. These measures (metrics) will help continuously monitor how well the department is conforming to the customer's requirements. A quality metric is simply a statement of what will be measured – it should be specific.

The Benefits of the Methodology

The disciplined application of the entire methodology leads to sustained improvement in department level processes. Benefits include:

- Reduced fire-fighting
- Better collaboration between the major work groups within the organization
- Clarification of work priorities
- Systematic identification and removal of the root cause of problems
- Fact-based decision making
- Prevention of problems

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8. **Establish A Plan To Meet Customer Requirements**—this step includes collecting the input from the previous seven steps and creating a department plan. The plan should be brief, customer focused and biased for action. It should outline key actions the department expects to take based on its process quality planning work to date, and it should include goals for the metrics established earlier.
9. **Implement The Plan**—now it is time to put the plan and knowledge into action. It is important that the entire department agrees to implement the plan. The supervisor of the department must take an intense interest in encouraging department employees to put the plan in action. Always run a pilot before implementing the plan on a large scale.
10. **Evaluate The Results**—monitor the quality and process metrics and frequently survey your customers to find out how the department is doing in meeting their requirements.
11. **Use Customer Feedback To Improve The Plan**-- In order to improve the plan the department will have to engage in solving some of the problems surfaced from customer feedback.

Continual process improvement is a practical and powerful way to promote and maintain quality in your organization. By fully understanding the impacts and consequences of your activities, you can determine if your way of doing things is the best way to serve your internal and external customers.

Process improvement allows your staff, as part of a team, to understand and shape their work, to see its inherent worth as part of the entire organization. It allows your staff to collaborate with others to develop the best known way to do the work and meet their customers' requirements.

When people are encouraged to improve their work processes they gladly seize the opportunity to change their work situation and deliver a quality product or service within and outside the organization.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author only and do not represent the views of the Techman/Kanata or of any of its directors, officers or employees. The author, Willie L. Carter, can be reached at wcarter@quantumassocinc.com