

Turning Overwhelm and Fragmentation into Focused Success

By Mark Samuel

Why is it that most people don't like change, but do like to make a difference (in their job) that is valued and respected by others? Why is it that organizations are questioning the work ethic of younger employees, while many employees are putting more effort and time into their jobs than ever before? Why is it that many people are bored or tired with the monotonous routine of their jobs or problems on the job, even though they are constantly faced with change? Why do organizations spend considerable time developing clear vision statements and strategies, yet have no sense of purpose or a way to identify accomplishments from the previous change effort before embarking on the next flavor-of-the-month change?

While organizations need to be adapt-able, constantly changing (improving) and responsive to the demands of its customers, leaders need to provide a clear and constant sense of direction and purpose. It is not enough to have a Vision that addresses being the "best." Leaders must create an identity and challenge that will capture the "hearts" of managers and employees, so that everyone knows why they are putting in the extra hours, why they are developing new skills and why there is a sense of urgency to accomplish results. Once an identity and challenge are decided upon, it becomes the reason for teamwork, the reason to utilize resources, the reason to improve communication, and the reason to improve operational processes. Otherwise, all of those improvement actions become meaningless activities that will change again when the next popular change effort gets publicized.

People tend to lose sight of their purpose and focus once they begin taking action on their daily responsibilities. Thus, it is critical for leaders to develop systems to keep reminding people of the organization's challenge, the organization's purpose that will make a difference, and the value received from accomplishing the milestones that demonstrate progress. The following actions can keep managers and employees focused, motivated and dedicated to improving their quality and efficiency:

Reprioritizing the Priorities. It seems that with every change a new set of priorities is established which alters the focus of managers and employees alike. As a result, people feel fragmented, overwhelmed and without direction. We can see this at meetings where we spend our time dealing with the crisis of the week and never feeling a sense of completion. It is necessary to change priorities, however we need to distinguish adding priorities from changing priorities.

Action. Reprioritize all of your priorities every six (6) months. Generally, teams will generate 20 to 25 priorities within a six month period. However, it is impossible to achieve that number of priorities in that short a time. This not only produces a sense of overwhelm, but also results in continuous failure that demoralizes everyone involved.

Identify the top 1 to 3 team priorities that are "non-negotiable" and focus each meeting on the accomplishment of those priorities. Even though the project leader may be an individual on the team, make it every team member's accountability to assure success on those priorities then, identify 7 to 10 priorities that will be addressed as a team, as time allows. Develop a strategy and set of milestones for each priority that gets reviewed by the team on an ongoing basis to assure that milestones are achieved. When priorities are accomplished or there are major changes in priorities, reprioritize to assure clarity and focus. Otherwise, look at the priorities every 6 months. Don't forget to tie the priorities back to the organization's identity and challenge. Otherwise, people will lose sight of the ultimate purpose of the priorities and the value that motivates people will be lost.

Create a Theme for Improvement. Unfortunately, it is easy to accomplish the organization's priorities without improving the quality, efficiency or teamwork necessary for upgrading our products and services.

Oftentimes organizations create separate improvement efforts to achieve this goal of continuous improvement. However, this can result in fragmented efforts where improvement is seen as an extra activity that is another burden. When there is a push between achieving the priorities and improvement projects, the priorities win, while the organization loses.

Action. Develop themes for improving services or products which link business priorities and the teamwork necessary to be successful. Instead of separate improvement efforts, these improvements are integrated with the business priorities and are accomplished with the achievement of the priorities.

Recognize the Achievement of Priorities. Too often, once one priority is achieved, leaders introduce the next priority. As a result, people involved with the achievement of the priority don't feel a sense of completion, or value, for all the effort put into the last project. Without feeling completion or value, we are less willing to expend our personal energy to assist others beyond basic requirements. Quality, improvement and teamwork are given-up so that we can complete the next assignment as quickly as possible without regard for purpose or identity.

Action. Implement a formal review of the priority and the accomplishment of the priority. Review the successes and failures of the project, since authenticity breeds trust. Emphasize the successes and differences that were made by contributing to the organization's identity and purpose. Include the aspects of the improvement themes that were achieved in the process. Make sure to identify the obstacles that were experienced along the way to indicate that success was not achieved in a vacuum of ideal conditions. Finally, address the failures or weaknesses with new improvement themes that will be carried into the next priorities, identified at the end of the review.