



Business Solutions

## Is it a People or Process Issue?

Behind every well-run business there are people and processes. Incidentally, behind every struggling business there are people and processes. Read the first two sentences again, it is not a misprint. The very same components that make one company successful are also present in those who struggle to get by.

So what makes the difference? Why are some businesses perpetually plagued with mediocrity while others achieve legendary status? The obvious answer is that it comes down to how well the people and the processes are managed. The not so obvious answer lies in answering this question: Is it a People or Process Issue? Here are 10 steps that will help you get to the heart and solution of any problem you face.

Step 1: Articulate the Issue – For example, “We are not getting our shipments out on time.” Before proceeding to the next step, it’s important to survey those involved with the process to be sure there is consensus about the issue. If there is agreement as to what the issue is, you are ready to proceed to Step 2. If there is disagreement, you’ll need to invest the extra time required to understand the different perspectives. Often times, those different perspectives provide a good foundation for the next step.

Step 2: Map the Process. It’s important to begin with agreement as to what the process really is. Have those involved with the process detail the actual steps involved with the process. This is a very linear process, answering the question; what do we do first, second, third, etc.? Just as when the blind man describes the elephant, each person involved with the process is likely to see it from a different perspective. These different perspectives can provide tremendous insight into the source of a problem. Often times, the activity of mapping a particular process can highlight fundamental flaws that can be easily addressed.

Step 3: Analyze the Issue – Is it a people or process issue? Does it happen all of the time? Some of the time? With certain products? With certain people? The answers to these questions will help you limit the scope of your measurement process.

Step 4: Validate with Measures - once the questions listed above have been answered you’ll want to collect baseline data on all the aspects of the process that are problematic.

Step 5: Narrow the Focus – Based on the data gathered, if it appears to be happening all of the time with certain products. The answer as to whether the issue is people or process related may be self-evident at this point, if not; it’s likely that the selected measures may need to be refined.

Step 6: Make the Invisible, Visible – Start sharing the data with everyone involved in the process. How often you share the information may depend on the process involved, more often is better than less. Be sure that the information you share presents a complete picture of the process. For example, it’s good to have a balance of measures that include both quality and quantity data.

Step 7: Formulate a Hypothesis – those closest to the issues generally have the best ideas for how to fix a problem. Work with the team to develop some key strategies for improvement. In a sense, this is a lot like a science experiment. A well run experiment includes gathering baseline

information, formulating a hypothesis about how a given variable will impact the baseline. From there you'll want to set up testing perimeters to track the effect of the new strategy.

Step 8: Test the Hypothesis – execute one strategy at a time. Measure the effectiveness of each strategy as compared with another. Take care not to introduce too many new variables to the process because it may contaminate the entire test. In other words it may be difficult to determine which new strategy had the greatest impact.

Step 9: Review the Outcomes – take the information on how each strategy performed, assuming the team has landed upon a solution to the problem establish the new “best practice” as a standard procedure. If the new strategies are not yielding the desired outcome, it's back to the drawing board to develop a new hypothesis to be tested.

Step 10: Refine the Process – Kaizen (continuous improvement) – over time the activity of measuring a baseline, deploying new strategies, tracking their effectiveness, and then establishing the best performing strategies as the standard should be repeated to achieve ongoing gains.

These 10 steps will serve as a guide for both analyzing and solving problems you face everyday in your organization. The most important message to take away from this article is to be sure to include those who have a direct impact on the problem with the development of strategies to fix the problem. Well meaning managers will sometimes jump to a solution without first getting buy-in from the team. Without that buy-in, even the best ideas are doomed to failure.

"A manager is not a person who can do the work better than his men; he is a person who can get his men to do the work better than he can."

**Frederick W. Smith**