

Teaming with Success?

by Paul Baker and Bill Franch



With the Quality Revolution in full swing by the early 1990s, organizations of all sizes and shapes were deploying improvement teams in record numbers equipped with the complete array of problem-solving tools and methodologies. Despite the massive push and high stakes, the devil was in the details of which tools, teams or approaches to use. Did customer team-members need to be involved? Were there any labor laws or contract issues that needed to be considered? Was the project product-related or service-related? What was the goal of the improvement project and how

should the goal be measured? How long should the effort last? Navigating through this myriad of questions made all the difference between successful efforts and exercises in futility that tended to poison future endeavors.

Of course, the most important step in assembling improvement teams is in defining the project scope and objectives. This not only helps in identifying what team skills and talents are needed, it also helps pinpoint what executive sponsors are required. If the project scope and objective make compelling business sense, it will be relatively easy to enlist the support of upper management within your organization. This is critically important to ensure that the team is given the necessary resources of time, money and people. The often-used idiom “skin in the game” is very appropriate in this context conveying the need to have sponsors and team members that have vested interest in the final outcome. Recruit team members having ownership, knowledge and authority of the process under consideration. Also consider adding subject-matter experts where appropriate in areas such as finance, regulatory compliance and human resources. In our opinion, the ideal team size is 5-8 highly motivated and engaged individuals.

Where should a continuous improvement team focus? The easiest and most logical starting points for improvement efforts hinge off of existing process metrics (e.g., yield, incident, billing-error or response-time rates) and customer complaints (internal or external). As the team skills develop, processes like shipping, receiving, technical support, customer service, planning and logistics can be included. It was always entertaining to see a department like Finance rear back in disbelief when they were approached to improve a process, such as the annual physical inventory. One would expect a team of professionals to welcome an improvement initiative into a process that hadn’t evolved for 50 years, but their initial reaction showed otherwise. Fortunately, hesitant departments like this would come around after tasting some success and quickly adopt the new methods for improvement.

What tools should the improvement team employ? The answer is any tool that delivers value and results to a particular project. Kaizen events used in conjunction with Lean tools were always good for generating quick gains in a compressed time frame. If you are after substantial improvements, you may need to use more

advanced tools like Six Sigma, FMEA and Design of Experiments. The cautionary note is to avoid the heavy and repeated use of specific tools. In addition, employing the wrong tools tends to bog the team down or cause the team to drift off course.

Once an organization develops solid team and project management skills, they could be potentially unstoppable with the one-two punch of continuous improvement and the more advanced tools for quantum-leap changes. However, all implementations do not lead to automatic success. It is probably more accurate that the majority of organizations launching teams fall short of their initial objectives leaving many implementations open-ended or fragmented.

Ask yourself the hard questions regarding team implementations in your organization:

- When was the last time a team improvement project achieved substantial results?
- What results have your team improvement projects contributed to your organization (e.g., increased yields, cost savings, increased market share, etc.)?
- Is my organization effective in evaluating both successful and non-successful team efforts?
- Are the right people on the teams and do we have sufficient management support?
- Have the actions of the improvement teams encouraged the organization for on-going efforts?

The bottom line with the deployment of improvement teams is that it has taken years for organizations not only to embrace but to dial-in the “world-class” practices. In moving the needle to “Operational Excellence”, these team initiatives require skills and know-how that few companies have. It’s best to get expert support to define, guide, mentor and tailor-fit the best practices for your organization. Please contact us for sage advice and guidance in defining and establishing a team structure that supports your business objectives, develops your key personnel and provides sustainable results.

About the authors:

Over the last 30 years, Paul Baker has been a solutions-driven manufacturing business executive developing positive and long-lasting multimillion-dollar customer relationships by creating differentiating value through quality, delivery, technology, and time-to-market initiatives across multiple sites and global markets. In addition, he has been a corporate instructor for Lean Enterprise, SPC, Six Sigma, and Program Management. He is a certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt through Villanova University. Paul is the Managing Director of Global Business Consulting, LLC, at www.global-businessconsulting.com.

During the last 30 years, Bill Franch has been a solutions-driven business leader with years of success producing breakthrough results for large businesses engaged in numerous product technologies. He is a business strategy specialist and lean six sigma expert, delivering best-in-class performance in EBIT, order fulfillment, cost reduction, and quality across regional sites and global markets. Consistently a top performer and recipient of many honors, including the Shingo Prize and Industry Week's America's Best Plants awards, Bill is currently the Managing Director of Performance Resource Partners, LLC, at www.performanceRP.com.