We all have professional pains of some sort. We all probably also apologize for some pains that are out of our control.

Improved relationships with customers and other external partners is key to improving your internal operations, and is something you can control. Establishing these relationships takes commitment, careful planning, and focused execution. It also requires a personal touch. Where should you start?

FOCUS ON THE CUSTOMER

Get to know your customers and those who impact your relationship with your customers.

First, listen to the voice of the customer. Talk to your customers and ask them what they value. Build relationships with your customers and show them what you have to offer that perhaps your competitors cannot. Many times you will see that customers are willing to provide more if you can provide the value they need.

Secondly, build relationships with the external parties that you rely on for success. External parties may include vendors, other service providers such as attorneys, bankers, the media, and, in more general terms, your community. These parties are an integral piece in how you provide value to your paying customers.

Focusing on building long-term partnerships helps to build trust, and helps to ensure that you will get what you need when you need it. You will want to gain the commitment from external parties to assist and support the operations of your business, but at the same time, these parties are expecting a certain level of commitment from you. Communicate expectations up front, and most importantly, meet or exceed these expectations. You will reap the benefits from a win-win relationship and, in turn, these benefits will pass through as value to your customers.

PROVIDING EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE

Who are your customers? The answer varies. There are the obvious end users of your organization’s product or service, but there are also others within your organization that require excellent customer service. Knowing what excellent customer service means to each customer requires a look from the outside - in.

Whether your organization provides a service, manufactures a product, or protects the interest of citizens, all customers have one thing in common: They do not like to wait. They want your product, service or attention now. However, for one reason or another, you are not always able to deliver these things in a timely manner. Whether delays are caused by overloaded employees, bottlenecks in the production process, equipment problems or delays in completing paperwork, issues in processes associated with these delays can prevent an organization from achieving real growth and creating real value.

APPLYING LEAN SIX SIGMA METHODOLOGY

Lean Six Sigma is simply a methodology that is used to analyze and improve processes by maximizing efficiencies through eliminating waste and non-value added activities. A combination of two concepts that have evolved over
the past few centuries with a presence in multiple industries, Lean’s focus is on making a process run faster and more efficiently while Six Sigma’s focus is to build quality into the process. Lean Six Sigma uses a five step process to find and correct underlying causes of failures (i.e., waste) within a process. When considering all failures in a process, considering the voice of the customer is key. It is also important to talk to individuals who have direct and indirect involvement in the process to determine what they value and where they see process failures occurring. Once failures are analyzed, solutions can be brainstormed, and a more value-added process can be rolled out.

Lean Six Sigma methodology stresses that knowing your customers, both internally and externally, is integral. This knowledge allows you to provide the right service at the right time to the right person, while minimizing waste and allowing flexibility for further improvement. Lean Six Sigma also focuses on finding the most effective way of delivering value – that is, what customers really want rather than what the provider thinks they want.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BEGIN A PROCESS USING LEAN SIX SIGMA?

1. Someone passionate about driving improvement and finding a better way to do things.
2. Understanding the voice of the customer and knowing how to identify non-value added failures in your processes.

Armed with these characteristics, anyone can begin making improvements at their individual level. However, the long-term goal should be focused on developing a Lean Enterprise. To get to this level, it is essential to have top management buy-in. Without it, holding individuals accountable is very difficult – if not impossible – and dedication of resources to work on such projects would not occur. To have commitment, one must have understanding. Learning about Lean Six Sigma and communicating results you have experienced firsthand can go a long way toward management’s buy-in and dedication to continuous improvement.

Adopting a new process means accepting change, and implementing change in any organization can be difficult. At times, it can be challenging for an organization to want to reevaluate what they’ve been doing for a long time. Patience is key as the benefits of the improved processes are realized, and just as the problems did not occur overnight, fixing them will not happen overnight either. An accountability and measurement program should be adopted using a realistic time frame for implementation. This will allow employees to measure their accomplishments against results attained prior to implementation of the improved process, while keeping them on task with stretch goals that are attainable.

Delivering better service with fewer resources is a hallmark of Lean Six Sigma. This is possible because “waste” is repurposed, allowing personnel to perform other tasks, and the dollars not spent on inefficiencies may be reallocated to providing additional services. It is a win-win situation for all the customers involved.

Katie has almost 10 years of experience in the accounting profession. As a certified public accountant and manager with James Moore, she has worked within a variety of industries, performing accounting services for commercial and nonprofit organizations, as well as on employee benefit plans. Specific services have included financial auditing and tax services, employee benefit plan auditing services, and consulting and advisory services. She is also a peer reviewer through the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) Peer Review Program.

Certified in Lean Six Sigma, Katie has been instrumental in facilitating Lean Six Sigma engagements with both commercial and nonprofit organizations, including engagements involving multiple operational, accounting, and IT processes. Her background in accounting and her understanding of human resources allow her to use her expertise in business aspects of a process while also providing insight on empowering employees through training programs.

A member of the AICPA and the Florida Institute of Certified Public Accountants, Katie was awarded a Masters of Accounting and a Bachelor of Science in Accounting from the University of Florida. She received her Lean Six Sigma certification from The Ohio State University.

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