

Pulling Your Team Together

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We're going in too many different directions. I have two operations teams, one for installation and one for service. Some of my office staff supports one team, some the other, some both. Right now each team, and each subgroup within the teams, focuses on getting their individual work done on time – and they're doing an okay job at that. What they don't do is think about how to cross support each other. As a result everyone seems to feel like they don't have enough time, aren't getting enough done, etc. Sometimes it seems like we're pulling against each other, rather than pulling together. What do you suggest?

Getting an operation to be as efficient and error free as possible is a big task. It takes stepping back from the day-to-day, so you can look at how all the puzzle pieces fit together – and where they don't fit as well as they could. Designing an overall plan for work flow, support, and handling customers is part of the job. Allowing time to work out the bugs is essential. Getting the players to work together by holding group work sessions is also key. Let's take a look at a plan of attack.

You first are going to have to differentiate between tactical and strategic efforts. Some part of the day has to be tactical – solving problems as they crop up, handling customers, dealing with people, getting to and from jobs,

etc. Another part of the day, or week, is best spent looking at things strategically – why are things happening, or not happening, and how can you organize so they work better.

Many times business owners get caught in the trap of trying to do too much, in too little time, with not enough resources. The harder they try, it seems, the less they get done. Part of the problem is being unable to see the forest for the trees. If you find yourself saying things like, "everything is important", or "no matter how hard I try, I can never catch up", or "it would be better if we used our resources more wisely", it is probably time to step back from the tactical, and make time to look at your business more strategically.

Once you've decided to look at things strategically, start with work flow. What happens from the time you set out to get a customer, until the time a product or service is delivered, billed and the customer has paid. You may think this is asking for a lot, and you're right. It might take you a couple of tries to lay it all out. Don't give up. After all, if you can't describe how things are done, or should be done, how can you expect anyone who works for you to get it done right..

One of the easiest ways to lay out work flow is to walk through your organization, as if you were a specific project, service or

product. Pin a project name or number on your shirt, vow to tape your mouth shut, and allow yourself to be propelled through the organization. You can actually make this a fun exercise, and I promise you'll learn a lot about how work flows through your organization, and where you run into problems that need to be addressed.

As you, the project, walk around the organization, from one desk to the next, or leave the building to go to a job site, take note of instructions people need. Keep a notebook with you to write down what you're learning. Keep an open mind, regarding what you can learn from this exercise. Don't try to figure things out, just watch what happens. Make note of where you, the project, sail along smoothly, and where you get stuck, ignored, or lost.

Start at the telephone, where a potential customer calls in and places an order or makes a request. Where do you physically have to go from there? Who sends you on to the next step? How sure are you that you know where to go next? What instructions do you need to take with you?

What document accompanies you, as you move around the organization, to describe what product, service or project you are? Remember, since you are a product, service or project in the making, you can't talk. You need

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a piece of paper to tell people what you are and what has to happen next.

Look at how many people you come in contact with. Watch how you, the project, physically move across the organization, walking from one side of the building to the other, or re-visiting the same desk time after time. Note how many times you come to a stop because you have to wait in a cue, or because someone doesn't know what to do with you. When do you get sent back a step, either because something was incomplete, or because . . . That's what you're there to find out.

Look for steps that seem redundant, or that are overly complex. Make note of ways you might try to streamline them. Look for gaps in information, where a written communication from the last person would save the next person time, effort or grief. Find all the spots where you, the project, end up sitting and waiting, or where you, the project, need re-work.

Also take note of any departments you don't come in contact with directly. How do they know you exist, and keep track of your status? For example, how does accounting know that the customer should be billed? How does sales find out if the customer received what was ordered? How does the customer communicate back about degree

of satisfaction with what was delivered?

Any holes you find need to be plugged, obviously. Even more importantly, however, is cutting out wasted effort and re-do's. Where along the way could you eliminate steps? Can you cut out steps, move desks closer together, or change the order in which work is performed.

Sometimes you may find that things are done in the right order, they just aren't done quickly enough, or aren't completed once they are started. So things start and stop, and sit in-between. Or they take too long to produce. Or they get started, but due to lack of materials or workers, they don't get finished. Or, due to incomplete instructions, they get finished wrong.

In some organizations, we'll find that projects compete for scarce resources. Often, the projects that have the loudest advocate get done, whether or not they are the most profitable, or easiest to complete. Projects that are small can get overlooked, even if the customer is one of the most important. What you want is to have projects flowing through, without bottlenecks or interruptions, consuming resources appropriate to the value and size of the project. If that isn't the case, then you have some work to do, to get things more into line.

Now it's time to fix the bugs you found in your investigation of what happens to a project as it flows through your organization. Bring together the people involved. Don't try to solve it for them. Ask people from the various departments to meet, discuss what you found, and make suggestions for how to improve things.

Allow time for discussion, disagreement, trying things out, re-trying, fixing, and de-bugging. Ask people to make big and small changes, and find simpler routes, if possible. Suggest more documentation wherever you found information broke down.

Look for opportunities to measure – number of items that flow through a specific check point, number of times that something comes back for re-work, number of products completed on time, number of projects completed in budget. Use measurement over time to identify what kind of progress is being made. Try to link progress measures to the outcomes you really want, such as more profit, less effort, better quality.

Finally, take a look at your management team. Weekly meetings are probably essential. They need to discuss how things are going – the strategic level, and how to share resources to get work done – the tactical level. Challenge your managers to look at the big picture; it's not just



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about how their area is performing, but how the company is performing overall.

You may want to look at how you compensate managers. Do they have a stake in the overall success of the business? Or are they only rewarded for looking at how their department is doing. Are they compensated for coming to meetings, to figure out how to make the organization run smoothly, or are they only compensated for running around to put out fires. Focus on strategic activities at least as much as tactical, as you plan out how people are recognized, rewarded, and promoted.

Looking for a good book? Try *Built to Last; Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, by Jim Collins.

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O: 914-238-3500. • F: 914-238-2529
AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com • www.StrategyLeaders.com
Strategy Leaders, Inc. • 5 Crossways, Chappaqua, NY 10514

