

Follow the Path of a Production Problem

10/29/07

We've just had a customer return a piece we made, that didn't work the way it was supposed to. Needless to say, the customer wasn't too happy, and neither am I. When I checked into production, I found that several items had been returned recently. When I asked my people why, they just shrugged and said that returns go with the territory – you can't be perfect every time. That's not the answer I want to hear. This isn't good for business. What do I do to figure out what's going on?

When you start to evaluate what's going on in production, there are many things to look at. I like to follow the path the part might have taken, from sales and ordering through to shipping and billing. It gives me a fuller picture of all of the ways that an item is touched, and ways that a decision could have affected how an item is produced.

Start with sales. Here are some questions to ask, to help trace the problem backwards and look for contributing factors. Is this the first order this customer has placed? Or, the first order of a new item? Is it something you produce a lot of, or just a small quantity? Is this a customer who is usually clear about what they want and easy to deal with, or is this a customer who always picks up on problems, no matter how small? Is this an item that's easy to make, or hard? Was there a request to make the part in a

rush, or was there plenty of time to get the order completed? What paperwork accompanied this part, as it transitioned from sales to operations?

Now let's look at operations. What area of the shop produced the item? Do they produce many of these items, or is this an unusual piece? Is it hard to make, or easy? On what day of the week did they produce the piece? What day of the week is the shop, or at least this area of the shop, usually the busiest? Is this part made by only one person, a team, or several different people or teams? How often are errors seen when making this part?

Now look at shipping. Who is responsible for getting the part into a box and out the door? Do they look at the part before it goes out? Do they know what to look for, in terms of problems with parts? What do they do if they find a problem? How receptive are people in production, to someone from shipping coming to them with a problem on a part? How well packed is the part? Is there any possibility that the part was damaged in shipping?

Who took the call from the customer? Does the customer consider this a problem of getting the wrong part, a damaged part, or a part made improperly? Did the customer provide information about the condition of the box the part came in? Did the customer say when they noticed a problem

– before or after they tried using the part? What, exactly, did the customer say, to describe what was wrong? Was the customer asked to send the part back? Did you get the part back? What did the customer want to do next, to resolve the problem?

Now, time to go to work to fix the problem. Your first step is to figure out if this is a problem isolated to one area. Or, does the problem crop up as the part moves from one area to the next. Is it due to lack of communication, lack of time, or lack of skill? For example, was the person producing the item unclear as to what was expected? Was the part made with a flaw – has that ever happened before? Was this a case of rushing to meet a deadline? Is this part often a problem to produce?

Ask all of the people involved to meet, to discuss the questions and answers, and identify solutions. Sit in on the meetings, but don't run them. Watch how people handle themselves. Are they actively seeking solutions, or simply putting in time. If you think one or more people are not taking this seriously enough, take them aside, and address your concerns with them. Make it clear to the group that production errors cost the company money, which in turn hurts everyone in the company. Make it clear you expect them to solve the problem and report back to you on how



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their solutions will permanently fix this problem. And then follow up to be sure that actions have been taken to resolve the matter.

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