Critical Success Factors for an Enduring Quality Program

Thu, 08/28/2008 - 09:44 — Chris



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During a recent NWQF (Northwest Quality Forum) meeting, the team members discussed how to market quality. There were some very interesting discussions. The list below attempts to capture some of the key ideas. In no particular order -

1. **Build Excellence through Small Wins** – Nothing begets success like success. Start small and build up credibility through focusing on small projects, don't try to be the million dollar hero straight out of the gate. If you fail, that can blow the whole program.
2. **Show Progress through Measurement** – Metrics and data are always a quality person's friend. Business people are much more likely to be influenced by positive progress through logical and consistent measurement than they will through anecdotes and stories. A strong scorecard at the beginning, even if it's only a few metrics, will be well worth it as progress is made.
3. **Know your Audience** and message appropriately – If you're talking to the executives focus on the numbers, if you're talking to the masses focus on personal development. At the end of the day, understanding the audience and focusing on what's in it for them will make your messages much more effective.
4. **Transfer the Knowledge** – Quality practices and techniques are very useful, but they don't do the organization any good if you keep them to yourself. Focus on transferring what you know and how you do things to the community. Many people will take the learning and apply it to their sphere of influence. In this way the organization's quality capabilities grow at a compounded rate. Transferring knowledge could take the form of training, leave-behind material (such as

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cards, small booklets, software tools, etc.), mentorship, leadership programs, performance management practices, such as MBOs (Management Business Objectives or personal goals / objectives), newsletters, blogs, or any channel that works for your organization.

5. **Reward Progress** – Amplify the good stuff that is happening and more good stuff happens. One example described included giving away a nice shirt to people that had completed a Green Belt project. Tying rewards to actual improvement progress goes much further than simply handing out cool trinkets with nice logos.
6. **It takes a Leader** – It is easier to have a successful program deployment if there is an executive involved, usually a Vice President or higher. They can help to push the messages, encourage folks to get on board, and use policies for getting actions accomplished. The danger is when a program becomes identified with that leader and the leader leaves, often the program can die or evolve into something else leaving people wondering what happened. So make sure to focus on many of the other critical success factors, which will help to ensure the program has a longer shelf life than that of the executive.
7. **Define your Mission & Sell your Vision** – By creating a compelling vision and a specific mission, people are more likely to identify with what is you're trying to accomplish. This picture becomes the driver and governor of all the decisions about the program going forward. Careful consideration, leadership buy-in and community involvement are important ingredients in defining the quality vision and mission.
8. **Communicate at all Levels** – Messages and channels should be defined to reach all levels of the organization. Leadership buy-in without community support or visa versa does not guarantee success. Achieving support for the vision and the mission at all levels contribute greatly to the long-term viability of the quality program. Some example mechanisms that can be used to reinforce the message and communicate the results include avenues such as, email, websites, RSS feeds, presentations, etc. Messages can be tailored for each audience, e.g. executive attention is short, so use short and to the point messages, email aliases and discussion forums are good for fleshing out topics or ideas in the community, websites are good for collecting all the information and communication about your program and become a reference site, RSS feeds are good in supporting a mobile audience. There are many opportunities for communicating, once size fits all will not work.
9. **Market Results** – As the program matures, the activities and their results should be publically communicated. Newsletters, presentations, blog entries, and celebrations are excellent communication avenues. Be sure to include results that achieve the goals (Wins) AND activities that did not (Lessons). Often, we learn more from our failures than our successes. Thomas Edison is said to have 'failed' to make a light bulb 2000 times, and when asked, he said he discovered 2000 ways on how not to make a light bulb.
10. **Lead by Example** – An experience communicated in the forum meeting included one company's CEO pursuing and receiving his Six Sigma certification. What better way of communicating commitment than following your own advice. Anyone at any level can exhibit dedication and it carries much more weight if communication and coaching comes from a platform of experience.
11. **Focus on Momentum Creation** – John P. Kotter was mentioned as an author of consequence when it comes to managing and/or driving change. One of his concepts refers to the harnessing the power of positive deviance, which is described as "intentionally departing from expected norms in honorable ways (Sonenshein & Spreitzer, 2004). Find the people that believe in your vision and are already acting in a way consistent with what the program is attempting to achieve. Work with them, establish a common vocabulary, and establish shared goals and they will become the best champions. Of course, this is but one way of creating momentum and the mechanism that works best for one organization may or may not work for yours. It's important to find that key or hook that best resonates with your organization, then exploit it as much as you can.
12. **Create Communities** – Once you've defined your audience, search for ways of creating communities around those audiences. For example, within a company, email aliases are a good mechanism for establishing a community. For example you may create a discussion alias that anyone can subscribe to, and then you can use that alias for communicating frequent news

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items or blog entries. You may create a quality leadership alias and use that for driving direction and receiving feedback on the program. Wikis or discussion forums are good tools as well for creating collaborative communities. Also periodic meetings, lunch and learn, live forums and symposiums are useful mechanisms for interacting with communities.

13. **Include the Money People** – If you're communicating savings for your improvement initiatives, be sure that it's believable. Bringing in the accounting or finance teams will help to make sure the numbers are real and pass the sniff test with the executives.
14. **Create a Brand** – Create an identity for your program. It could be a logo, a word or phrase, a mascot or any combination of mechanisms. This will help to create a short hand way of communicating about your program. It will help people identify with it, and as your success builds it will give people something to join and/or brag about. Use your identity on your marcom (marketing communication material) so that it's always out front and part of your message.

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