Dealing with obstacles when starting improvement projects

I have to admit I do not like the saying ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’ I understand its usage, but it promotes the idea of leaving things alone until they fail on their own. I would be happier if the saying were ‘If it ain’t broke, verify that it works and will not fail.’ I’m sure customers would be happier too.

I have worked with a variety of organizations in various industries, and it is not uncommon to hear that the employees feel that they are continually reacting to problems and addressing them in crisis mode. I even hear this at ASU. This is saying that if service processes are not in crisis mode (broken), the organization does not pay any attention to them. It is only once things go critical that steps are taken to assess the process and fix problems (or worse, just address the symptoms).

This approach is very expensive. Service failures have negative impacts on both internal and external customers, they require a number of employees to stop what they are doing and work quickly to fix problems, and then the organization has to spend time doing some form of service recovery after the fact.

A better approach, and one that is more in-line with maintaining sound service processes is to assess and improve processes before they fail. While people may be resistant to committing resources to evaluating processes that appear to be working fine, it is vital to ensuring that customers receive the service they need and deserve long-term. Think of this like a check-up at the doctor's office. The patient may feel fine, but the doctor is assessing them just to be sure there are no hidden problems. Taking a proactive approach allows us to close performance gaps before they become an issue for customers. Some of the benefits of preventing service failures are:

- No negative impact to customers
- No scrambling to find resources to fix problems
- No need to incur higher costs such as overtime, after-hours support fees from vendors, rushed shipping, etc.
- No need to pull employees away from the work they are doing, delay projects, or stop serving customers to address a crisis
- Less stress on employees
- Less chance of issues occurring which would result in poor public relations
- The organization can spend the time required to listen to customers, make decisions and implement improvements vs. having to rush to make quick fixes

Obstacles

I find it interesting that if you ask people if they think improving service before they fail is a good thing, they will universally say 'yes.' I can honestly say that I have not
encountered anyone who has said ‘no’ to this question. The problem is that when you take action to assess processes, especially those processes that are not experiencing any issues, obstacles begin appearing in your path.

Now you are not going to find many people listing off reasons why they are creating these obstacles, or even admitting that they are doing it. Instead, resistance appears in passive forms, and you will encounter excuses like:

- “We don’t have time to make improvements now, we have a deadline approaching.”
- “We can’t make improvements now. We have to focus on serving our customers.”
- “We can’t spare anyone to work on improvement projects because they are all too busy / overworked.”
- “We have always done it this way and things are fine.”
- “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

My least favorite of these reasons is that they cannot stop serving customers to improve processes, especially when there are known service deficiencies. That implies that the organization needs to keep giving customers sub-standard service until the process completely melts down, and they don’t have a choice but to stop serving them and fix the problems. Service improvement can, and often does, take place while customer needs are still being met, and there is no reason to knowingly provide poor service to customers.

It is true that at times there really are deadlines that must be met, or the staff is very busy, but these are short term situations. When they become the status quo for a department, then it’s either an excuse or the department is in need of improvement. To overcome obstacles like those listed, we need to look at the root causes that would drive someone to create the hurdles in the first place. There can be any number of reasons someone might resist improvement, but the primary motives that I have encountered are:

- They do not see the need to improve a process that does not appear to have any issues.
- They have built up a level of comfort with the job and don’t want to see it changed.
- They are personally invested in the job and see improvements or changes as criticism of the processes they created and their personal efforts.
- They do not like the idea of an ‘outsider telling them how to do their job.’
- They have a fear of the unknown and what might come from the improvement efforts.
They have a fear that they might not be performing as expected and be punished for it.

You will need to be aware of concerns like these, be sensitive to them, and be prepared to surmount them.

**Addressing obstacles**

There is no definitive method for overcoming resistance to assessing and improving processes, but there are a few approaches that are usually effective in this area. Here are some options that you may want to try.

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<th>Reason For Resistance</th>
<th>Potential Approach</th>
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<td>The person does not see a need to improve a process that does not appear to need improvement, or does not want to move out of their comfort zone and change what they are doing.</td>
<td>• Use customer feedback and process data to identify areas of opportunity. Quantify the benefits of making improvements before processes fail and contrast that to what would happen if the process fails. Use this information to create a sense of urgency and demonstrate an immediate need for action.</td>
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<td>Making improvements are viewed as a criticism of a person’s work, or they do not like the idea of an outsider telling them how to do their job.</td>
<td>• Reinforce that the effort is not an assessment of the employees. Improvement efforts are focused on optimizing processes, and that is an area of expertise you bring to the table. • Engage the employees in helping to identify ways to improve the process and make their jobs better, easier, and more rewarding. • Engage the employees in the implementation of changes so they will be aware of what is happening and will have some control and ownership in the changes.</td>
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<td>People have a fear of what is happening, why it is happening and what the future will look like.</td>
<td>• Ensure that the need for improvement, the improvement efforts, and the end state are clearly communicated to the organization. Maintain regular communication throughout the entire process.</td>
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<td>There is not enough time and resources to improve processes.</td>
<td>• If the lack of time and resources in an organization is chronic, it could mean</td>
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that they are in desperate need of reducing waste and streamlining processes. If they will make the time and commit to doing this, it is very likely that they will be able to free up resources and complete work more quickly. This will allow them to take on larger projects and offer additional services to their customers in the future.

It’s the process not the people

Dr. W. Edwards Deming believed that when quality is poor, it is the process that is to blame, not the employees. My experience supports this thinking. It is rare to encounter people who do not care about their jobs and are intentionally underperforming. The vast majority of employees try to do the right thing for the customer and their organization. That said, any time that extra scrutiny is placed on a process, people get nervous that their performance is being evaluated. I cannot stress enough that when you are conducting process improvement work, you have to make it clear up-front that your focus is on closing performance gaps in the process itself. They get old and wear out, and just because a process is not running as well as it should, does not necessarily mean that anyone is performing poorly. Admittedly there will be times you will need to evaluate employee performance, but that is to assess where additional support and training are needed. Service process improvement is not an effort to reduce headcount. In fact, as services and their supporting processes improve, organizations often find that they have additional resources. They can use these resources to create new services, take on new challenges and complete projects that have been waiting to be finished for some time. Experienced staff will be needed in these efforts, so reducing staff would be counter-productive.

Use change management strategies

There are numerous strategies for implementing change and addressing resistance, and these strategies can be effectively used to overcome obstacles to improvement efforts. I like the 8-step organizational change model described by Dr. John Kotter in his book Leading Change. The model is straightforward, logical, and can be adapted for use in efforts at any level of an organization. The model steps are:

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Create a guiding coalition
3. Develop a vision and strategy
4. Communicate the change vision
5. Empower broad-based action
6. Generate short term wins
7. Consolidate gains and produce more change
8. Anchor new approaches in the culture

The steps can be used in succession, or you may find it beneficial just to use a few key tactics from different steps to overcome specific obstacles. If you would like to learn more about Dr. Kotter’s model, I suggest reading his books Leading Change and Our Iceberg Is Melting. Both books are quick reads, and I think you will find them beneficial.

Each organization and the individuals within them are unique and will pose their own challenges as you work to make improvements in your area. As you do this, you will get a feel for where resistance generally comes from, develop strategies for overcoming obstacles, and identify who you can count on to help you move efforts forward. Being aware of what obstacles may arise and the root causes of them will help you prepare for and be ready to address them. As always, I welcome your questions and feedback. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

About the author:

Clayton Taylor, MBA, is the Director, Organizational Performance and a Certified Six Sigma Master Black Belt working in the Office of the Executive Vice President, Treasurer and Chief Financial Officer at Arizona State University. He leads the Organizational Performance Office. He and his team currently consult with diverse Business and Finance and university-wide operational areas to lower costs, improve operational efficiency and provide the highest quality customer experience to internal and external customers. Mr. Taylor can be reached at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

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