Making service improvement projects manageable

One question I often get asked is how to charter and execute a project that will improve service in a department or operational unit. With so many factors and potential changes to consider, it appears to be a daunting task. This is usually because the person asking the question is viewing the concept of ‘service’ as a single entity that has to be addressed all at once – a fix everything now approach. The truth is, trying to improve service across the board in one project is a recipe for disaster.

You don’t have to change and improve every aspect of service to achieve strong results. The Pareto Principle tells us that 80% of customer dissatisfaction is driven by 20% of the causes. If you break down the concept of service into small pieces, you can identify the areas that need the most improvement and will have the greatest impact on your customers. From there, you can create and execute smaller, more manageable projects which will make substantial improvements to the service you provide and improve customer satisfaction. You may also find that some services you are providing are not creating any customer dissatisfaction, and do not need any improvement.

So, how do you identify and prioritize the smaller projects? First, you need to define the service(s) you provide and the associated customers’ needs. Second, you need to look at your list of services and prioritize them based on where customers are experiencing the greatest dissatisfaction and the need for improvement.

Define your services

This step seems like it should be simple. Everybody knows what services they offer, right? That may be true at the macro-level, but for the purposes of identifying areas for improvement, you need to look beyond the surface and define the services you provide at a more detailed level. The greater level of detail helps you to identify customer needs and find specific service issues that are causing dissatisfaction.

For example, I report to the Business and Finance Communications Group. Just based on the name alone, you can guess that the team supports the communication of information from the Business and Finance department to the university, our partners, and the media. That summarizes the activities of the team but does not truly describe the breadth and depth of services the team provides and is not detailed enough to allow us to simply ‘improve service.’ Digging down further, you find that the team offers a wide variety of distinct but interconnected services:

- Content development and writing
- Editing services
- Graphic design
- Strategic communications with the media
Web content development and maintenance
Social media management
Marketing and promotions
Video production
Photography

If you were to try to make improvements to the Communications Group across the board, you would have a very hard time figuring out where to start and what must be addressed. Each of these services has its own customer base, each with their own needs from the various services offered. To improve service they have to be addressed as separate, but related entities.

Once you have identified your specific services, you have to determine who the customers for those services are, and segment them into sub-groups by their needs. The majority of your customers will come to you with a pretty standard set of requests, but there are always customers who will require different levels and types of service, or those which ask for an occasional exception. You will want to be aware of the possible range of needs that you must meet and ensure that you can address them.

After this first step is complete, you should have a list of the services you provide, and for each one have a second list of the customer groups who use the service and what they want from it. You now know where the potential dissatisfiers or ‘pain-points’ exist for your customers.

**Prioritizing services for improvement**
There are a number of ways to prioritize services for improvement, but for the purpose of this blog I am going to describe a simplified method.

Since the idea is to improve service to your customers, you will want to look for those pain points which are causing them the most dissatisfaction. The best source of information is your customers, so you will want to hear directly from them. Collecting voice of customer feedback is going to be critical to identifying opportunities for improvement. This type of information can be collected through interviews, focus groups, surveys, complaints, or direct observation of the customer. Additionally, talking with the staff that interacts directly with the customers is helpful in identifying the issues being encountered and where opportunities for improvement exist. They will also have insight into the parts of the process that may be causing problems for customers. Looking at the frequency with which different issues appear in the feedback you collect, will be a strong indicator of which issues should be given the highest priority.
Prioritizing services for potential improvement simply based on the opinions of subject matter experts and customer feedback is not sufficient. Some additional factors that you will want to consider when prioritizing improvement projects are:

- The expected cost of making improvements vs. the expected return from the improvement
- The expected time and resources required to complete the project
- Potential disruption caused by making the changes
- The actual number of customers who would be affected

After this second step is complete, you should have a prioritized list of your services and the associated improvement opportunities for each one.

**The benefits of smaller projects**

With a prioritized list of services needing improvement, you can now charter and execute projects. Your efforts to this point will have taken you from an ambiguous and frustrating ‘make service better everywhere’ situation, to ‘make specific services or service elements better.’ You will have several smaller projects rather than one large one, but they will be easier to manage and the end result will be close to (if not better than) what you wanted to accomplish with a single generalized project.

I welcome your questions and feedback about this topic or any other service operations or process improvement topic. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

**About the author:**

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