Solving problems by asking ‘why?’

Like many of you, the units in our organization have received feedback from the annual student survey conducted as part of the Service Excellence Initiative, and they are moving to make improvements. One thing I have noticed over the years, here at ASU and in companies I have worked for in the past, is that when people receive feedback they often take it at face value and don’t spend much time trying to understand it any further. The problem with that approach is that a customer’s feedback usually describes their experience with the service they received and rarely points to the root causes behind why their experience was the way it was. If you don’t know what is behind someone having a great service experience, you can’t take advantage of that knowledge and replicate it for other customers. If you don’t know what is behind a customer’s bad experience, you can’t fix the issue and prevent it from occurring again.

Let me give you an example. The very first Six Sigma project I worked on was for a Fortune 500 retail organization. Senior leadership noticed that in one service area sales were decreasing and fewer customers were setting up service appointments. The solution seemed pretty obvious to many of the unit’s leaders: the customer service being provided by the staff was not as good as it should be, customers were becoming unhappy during the interaction, and the result was lost sales. The proposed solution was to provide customer service training to all of the associates and monitor their performance to make sure they were providing good service. In this case, using the Six Sigma methodology, we started out by asking why customers were walking away without setting up service appointments. A thorough examination of the interactions showed us that the service being provided was quite good, and the customer service representatives had all of the tools and training they needed to be successful. What we found was that the associates were not asking customers for the sale (the ‘why’). Without guidance, customers were not sure how to wrap up the service interaction and were just walking away. By making a small change to how the service representatives interacted with customers, sales increased by more than $2 million per year.

If the organization had just jumped on what appeared to be the obvious solution, there is a chance they might have seen a short-term spike in sales, but implementing service training and having supervisors monitoring individual staff would have been costly and time-consuming. The company would have ultimately lost money if they attempted to resolve the problem that way.

So why don’t people ask ‘why’ more often?

The 5 Whys

I would like to introduce a very simple tool for root cause analysis, called The 5 Whys. When you encounter a problem, you ask ‘why’ five times. The theory is that by the time you have asked ‘why’ five times, you will be at or very close to the root cause of the
Take a look at this example. Assume that during the fall and spring rush periods, when students are returning to classes, your department hires a number of temporary workers to provide services and answer questions. During this time, the department sees a spike in complaints because the temporary workers are making mistakes and not providing the right information. The first time you ask ‘why,’ you will essentially be questioning the symptoms that the customers are experiencing. In this case the first question would be “Why are the temporary workers making mistakes?” In answering the question, you might find there are several answers, but for now, pick the most-likely answer and turn that into the next question. Each time you answer the question, the answer becomes the next question. This process repeats until you reach a point that you cannot turn the answer into another question. When this happens, you will be at the root cause. Let’s take the temporary worker issue to its conclusion:

- Why are the temporary workers making mistakes?
  - The temporary workers are not given enough training and practice before serving customers.

- Why are the temporary workers not given enough training and practice before serving customers?
  - There is not enough time for a lot of training in advance.

- Why is there not enough time for a lot of training in advance?
  - Temporary workers can only be hired a short time ahead of the rush period.

- Why can temporary workers only be hired a short time ahead of the rush period?
  - The budget does not allow for keeping the temporary employees on the payroll for extended periods.

- Why does the budget not allow for keeping the temporary employees on the payroll for extended periods?
  - The current operating budget is not set up to allow the temporary employees to be hired sooner.
On the surface, it looks like the employees are not good at their jobs or are not being careful when serving the customers. There are management methods for addressing poor employee performance like this, but those methods would not be effective in this case. After digging deeper, we can see that there is a training gap caused by not having the resources to hire the temporary employees far enough in advance to train them properly. It’s not that they are poor employees; they just don’t have what they need to do the job. The root of the problem in this case is that the operating budget needs to be adjusted to allow the employees to be on-boarded sooner and given the proper training. There may also be some opportunity for providing them with better support while they are serving customers.

You can use The Five Whys to think through a problem while sitting at your desk, or use it in a staff or project meeting to guide a group discussion. It’s not going to be the definitive method for identifying root causes and supporting your conclusions with hard data, but it is very effective at helping you to look past the surface of the problem and get you started down the path toward identifying the root causes. Give it a try and I think you will find this to be a valuable tool as you work to improve services for your customers. As always, I welcome your questions or comments. 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.