

Choosing the “Just Right” Improvements

By David Eisenberg

Last year, the American Society for Quality (ASQ) published its Global State of Quality research report, “Discoveries 2016.” The report is a comprehensive view of the state of the quality and continuous improvement industry, practices, and profession. A key trend that emerged from this research is that organizations are increasingly considering **quality as a strategic asset to drive organizational success**. ASQ offered a new take on the definition of quality: “Quality is considered a continuous improvement activity to proactively identify and manage opportunities.”

Think about the government agency, project or program your team is involved with. There are always opportunities for improvement, whether in the service you provide to the public and other agencies or your internal working processes. How do you choose which improvements to pursue? Utilizing continuous improvement activities can help your team focus on the most impactful opportunities and turn quality into a strategic asset to drive success.

ALIGNING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT TO STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PLANS

When evaluating your improvement opportunities, start with the 10,000 foot view. Read your agency or department’s strategic management plan with particular focus on its goals and objectives. A strategic management plan is a roadmap and your improvements should be in alignment with those future plans. There are many continuous improvement tools you can put to good use, depending on the situation.

For example, facilitate an Accountability Flow Down or L-Map exercise to create a “line of sight” between your plan’s goals and the services or processes you want to improve. These exercises create a shared vision among leaders and can identify process gaps or unclear roles and responsibilities. For more information on L-Maps, check out Tom Pyzdek’s article at <https://www.pyzdekinstitute.com/blog/six-sigma/mapping-for-business-improvement.html>.

Audits and assessments are also powerful continuous improvement tools. Traditionally, audits and assessments were aimed at verifying compliance. However, they are invaluable to identify and highlight opportunities for improvement at all levels of an agency or project.

PRIORITIZING OPPORTUNITIES

It’s easy for an agency that embraces continuous improvement to quickly become overwhelmed by a mountain of improvement opportunities. Knowing which projects to pursue can often make or break your success. Thomas Pyzdek, author of *The Six Sigma Handbook* and world-renowned expert in process improvement, said it best: “Find a Goldilocks project...a project that’s just right.”

One of the best tools to use in finding that “just right” project is priority rankings. The Risk Priority Number (RPN) is a quantitative method that assigns a numerical value to an issue, risk or opportunity using three parameters – severity, occurrence and detection. Multiplying these together gives you a number that helps rank improvement opportunities.

Additional criteria can be added to your formula too - level of effort, ease of implementation or cost. An RPN can help your team filter which projects can be resolved through standard continuous

improvement activities and which require more in-depth improvement methodologies such as Lean Six-Sigma. One of the most common methodologies to determine an RPN is through Failure Modes and Effects Analysis (FMEA). You can learn more about FMEA's at <http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/process-analysis-tools/overview/fmea.html>.

RISK MANAGEMENT

An added benefit of using RPNs or similar rankings for improvement opportunities is that it provides a quantitative link between quality and risk. Many agencies and projects use risk registers to identify and mitigate risks, and most use some form of an RPN. Often, items on a risk register coincide with opportunities identified through your continuous improvement activities. Aligning your improvement opportunities with medium to high risk items on the risk register is an effective way to gain consensus for your improvement project while also mitigating risk.

It's common in government agencies to have risk registers managed locally (districts, states, projects) and they are not always easy to locate. Additionally, due to the added sensitivities of working in public agencies, risk registers might have restricted viewing rights. If you find yourself in a situation where you can't access the risk register, try collaboration – provide the owner of the register your list of improvement ideas and ask them for their recommendations on which ones might best mitigate known risks. If you need to brush up on your risk management terminology, watch this seminar by Timothy Lozier at <http://asq.org/2014/06/risk-management/the-expanding-role-of-risk-management-in-compliance-webcast.html>.

IN CONCLUSION

Now, more than ever, government is under the bright light of scrutiny to become more efficient and effective. Focusing on those “just right” improvement projects that help mitigate your agency or projects highest risks will help your team use quality as a strategic asset to drive organizational success. And in the process, you might just have some fun doing so.

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