

A Fresh Look at Major Improvements in Your Organization

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I've had conversations recently with clients and potential clients about making an overt step towards intentional improvement in their organizations.

I emphasize the word "intentional." Every member of an organization's leadership team is looking for improvement all the time. So, if you go into a leadership team meeting and announce a new initiative to improve the organization, others may laugh or look at you with surprise and confusion.

Yet my experience is that just about any organization can make step-change improvements from where they are. We all get comfortable doing what we do each day. To do something different (that is, to change, to improve), you need to pause and think about things differently. I find that a fresh look collectively (everybody together) is better than a unilateral perspective.

Any member of a leadership team can initiate this creative look at your organization's health. Ask for a special allocation of time so that everyone can participate, making this a thorough conversation.

Here's a rather simple yet effective approach. Plan to generate two lists of descriptive statements. One list is all the things that are rather healthy and are delivering good things for the organization and its customers. The other list is all the things that are not as healthy and are not delivering what was intended or expected when they were started.

Establish a ground rule at the outset that the group will not spend any time "fixing" anything in this exploratory meeting. There's usually a tendency to offer suggestions for the cause and the cure for those things that are not healthy. So somebody (you?) needs to manage the agenda and make sure the ideas keep flowing, and that you continue to add systems or symptoms to both lists.

What agenda should you follow? I suggest you look at your operations starting with the end results and working backward. What results do you measure and track? How often and well do you share those results with the rest of the organization? How well do they understand why these results are the ones the organization tracks? How well do people understand the specific behaviors that contribute beneficially to those results?

All work is a process. What are the key processes that deliver your organization's results? How well are these processes documented? In an emergency involving the person who normally executes each process, could a colleague follow the written process and keep the operations going? Are the owners of each process continually looking for improvements that would reduce waste and rework and would enhance safety, reliability, quality, and productivity?

What's it like to work in your organization? How healthy are your hiring and orientation systems? What causes employees to stay with your organization? What causes people to leave? How healthy are the relationships between individuals (and individual departments) in your organization?

How do your customers view your organization compared to your competitors? What do the competitors have that you don't have? How well do your customers understand what you do to ensure that their needs and preferences are met?

How well does each of your employees, know, abide by, and "own" your organization's mission statement, vision, values, and strategic plan? How recently were these consciously evaluated? What could be done to enhance the personal ownership of these concepts by each employee?

How effective is the leadership of your organization? How well are the skills of future leaders being developed? How healthy is the quality and quantity of feedback that is being delivered to and sought from the organization's leaders?

As you can imagine, all of the above can consume a sizable quantity of time. And you may gain only a somewhat distorted perspective of what's really happening in your organization. Would the employees who do the work of your organization provide the same answers to these questions?

The realization that their answers may be different leads to gathering the same information from your employees. I recommend that you engage an outside, well-trained listener to conduct an organizational health assessment. This will require a day or two of hour-long conversations with a cross-section of employees. The outside assessor will generate a descriptive report of "what currently is" as experienced by the people in your organization.

All of the above will generate an expectation that something will be done to address the areas identified as opportunities for improvement. If you and the other members of your leadership team are not willing to allocate the time and resources to pursue the improvements identified, you probably should not even initiate this process. The disappointment from failing to meet raised expectations is probably more damaging than leaving what currently exists alone.

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