

Random Acts of Improvement

by Dennis Hooper, published in the Houston Home Journal on Tuesday, April 6, 2004

If you've read this column recently, you know that last week I attended the 16th annual "Quest for Excellence" conference in Washington, DC.

What an experience! Over a thousand people, all committed to quality service, continuous learning and improvement, and reliable, excellent performance!

Two and a half days of information shared by team members of this year's seven winners of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. It was extensive information overload! But what a huge inspiration!

The title of this column comes from Dr. Robert A. McKanna, superintendent of Community Consolidated School District 15, a highly multicultural suburb of Chicago. In his closing comments in which he shared his organization's "Lessons Learned," Dr. McKanna observed, "Most organizations have people who want to do good work. Desiring to serve, these individuals look for ways to improve what they are doing. However, **random acts of improvement don't achieve overall excellence**. Exceptional quality requires having a planned, intentional process where every contributor seeks improvement continually."

It's easy to claim excellent service--just read a few marketing brochures. Few meet those standards, however! No leader or contributor can move an organization to that point by just wanting it.

Are you willing in your organization to ask, "What would delight our customers?" Do you have the guts to ask your customers directly, "What could we do in serving you that would absolutely delight you?"

Why would any organization not ask this question? Husbands and wives, why would you not ask this of your mate? Leaders, why would you not ask this question of your team members? Team members, why would you not ask this of downstream colleagues who use your work output as their work input?

What would you need to be comfortable in asking this question? Thinking deeply about this question will start you initiating enhancements that will improve quality, safety, and production--and reduce costs!

Would you need a vision like that of St. Luke's Hospital of Kansas City, Missouri? Their vision addresses the needs of their obvious customers (patients) as well as their internal customers (team members): "The Best Place to Get Care--The Best Place to Give Care."

Would you need a clear mission and set of values that your stakeholders--customers, suppliers, team members, and community members--also support?

Would you need procedures that your team members can reliably execute and that lead to predictable outcomes?

Would you need to measure many things throughout the process to ensure that the output meets your desired specifications? And with continued attention, would you expect to see improvement over time?

Doing all this may seem like too much work! Let's face it, we humans are selfish! We want to be served, not to serve. It's not natural to inconvenience ourselves to delight others. Thinking in that way is a bit threatening. How much will it cost? What if the customer's expectations are too high? What if something happens and we can't deliver?

Becoming an organization of excellence is a big decision! The two organizations mentioned above and five other companies I met with last week made that decision intentionally! They are among 56 organizations that have met the criteria for performance excellence required of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Each is waiting to serve YOU, to answer your questions and to offer helpful hints in how to provide quality through an intentional commitment to service and continuous improvement.

When I attended the "Quest for Excellence" conference, it was with a client from Baltimore. I expect to attend next year's conference, April 10-13, with clients from Georgia. Interested?