

KickSTART

Part Four: Generating Improvement Opportunities

Objective: to get your team to identify two sets of service improvement opportunities: major strategic projects that impact your top level business processes and tactical initiatives that they can start right now. Then get your sponsor to agree to them.

Stage two: feedback on current performance

Now we move onto the second part of the event, which is to highlight the greatest opportunities for improvement within your current working practices. This will provide you with a hit list of improvement activity

Slide 8: educating management

Explain to the audience that this is the second part of the session where staff members get to provide feedback to their management team about how things really work.

As I said process improvement is as easy as fixing all the things that don't work. There is an old manufacturing trick, which is to give all the guys who work on the line a tin of red paint and some brushes then get them to walk along the line putting red blobs on anything that doesn't work. Most of the line gets away without any paint, but there are some pieces of equipment that end up looking like they have a bad dose of chicken pox. These are the things that need to be fixed, and if they are fixed these are the things that will have the biggest impact.

It is a great trick, but it doesn't work in service industries because a lot of what we do is intangible, you can't see it, and you certainly can't put red paint on it. This exercise overcomes that by using a visual representation, or diagram of what is going on instead.

Explain to the group that they are going to apply some of what they have learnt to the work they do. What you want them to do is provide honest feedback to the sponsor on how well their business really works.

Then ask your sponsor to explain the business process diagram you have created to the group, do this in some detail and then check that everybody is clear and understands what it is saying.

Stick up a big (A0 size) copy of the map on a wall and then tell everybody that you want them to put a cross (or vote) against everything that doesn't work as well it could. Your aim here is to highlight the really bad things, not to get a rash of marks against everything so it is wise to limit the number of votes people have.

How to vote:

It really doesn't matter how you vote but here is the method I use:

1. Count the number of steps or items that people can choose
2. Divide that number by 3
3. Allow people that many votes or marks. (So if you have 15 steps in your diagram give out 5 votes)
4. Let people put all their votes on one step if they want to, or spread them about.

As I said, it doesn't really matter how you rig the voting so long as everybody has an equal voice.

What will you see?

If you have 30 people in the room and they all get 5 votes that's 150 marks on your piece of paper. (That is why you need it printed out nice and big). You will see that they are clustered. There will be hot spots; these are the bits that you need to turn your attention to first.

It is easy to dismiss the results from the voting, what do your staff know? And it is only qualitative feedback anyway.

Well your staff knows a lot, they work with the operational processes day in day out, they know which bits don't work, and if you have a significant number of them voting on it the feedback stops being anecdotal and starts to develop a quantitative nature. They will tell you what needs fixing.

Once everybody has had their vote hand the stage back to the sponsor and get them to comment on what they see. It is important to broker the discussion:

- What surprises him?
- What did he know about?
- What would he like to know more about?

Your aim is to get a rich discussion going between the sponsor and the team about the things that really don't work, so that he gets first hand feedback.

The final question is what would he like to do about it?

Remember to warn your sponsor about this, you don't want to put him on the spot in front of a whole room of people. He won't thank you for it.

Output

You should aim to get a written commitment on a piece of flipchart paper that your sponsor signs. This is one of the key outputs of your session and you will work on it as a key service improvement project later

Stage three: generating improvement projects

You are now at the third and final part of the event. The idea now is to get the team to generate a list of employee lead improvement projects, small pragmatic items that they can start to run with instantly.

The next three slides explain what you would like them to do:

Slide 9: explains the principles you want people to apply when they are thinking through opportunities.

Slide 10: gives the team the instructions you want them to follow to generate improvement opportunities.

Slide 11: clarifies how you would like them to present back to your sponsor.

You might want to give the participants a hand out at this stage. If you do there is one you can download on the web site.

Slide 9: keys to service improvement

The aim of this slide is to explain how service improvement works, what some of the key principles are and that everybody has a part to play in making it work. We discussed these points earlier in section one.

As a high level reminder here are the key principles again:

- People who do the work know the work best of all and so are best placed to highlight the things that need to be fixed and work out how to fix them.
- We should take out our own rubbish; we all have a responsibility to fix our own issues. This is not about what other people can do for you it is about how you can help yourself.
- Fix what we can fix, worry about what we can fix and not what we can't. It is far better to fix something that is within our control than not fix anything at all.
- Lots of small stuff makes a big difference, it may sound like we are only talking about small changes but if you can get momentum then all those small changes will add up and make a significant difference
- Managers should manage; they are employed to make decisions, not procrastinate and look for reasons not to take things forward. At the end of the next activity you will be asked to present your plans back to your manager for agreement.

Discuss these points with the group; get them to tell you what they think. There is nothing controversial here; it is all just common sense though too often we don't think this way.

Slide 10: finding the opportunities

Now you need to explain to the group what they need to do to generate some service improvement ideas of their own.

First split the group up into their working teams with their team manager if there is one and give each group a flip chart, pens and post it notes.

Explain to them that now they will work through some service improvement projects of their own and that they will take roughly an hour and a half doing this. The approach they should take is a little prescriptive so it is worth going over it with them:

Purpose:

They should write down what their purpose is. What they are there to do for the customer, the person who pays their wages. One or two sentences on a flip chart should cover it, try to be specific and avoid the management jargon. If they are there to collect taxes then their purpose might be to "Collect tax for the government simply and effectively" if they work in a

pharmacy their purpose might be “to make sure customers get their prescription drugs in a timely manner”. There is no trickery here; it is just about being clear. If the purpose they come up with is “to manage the strategic relationship between customers, clients and members of the tactical gateway executive” or some other jargon then that isn’t good enough. What are they there to do and who for?

Brainstorm:

Next they should brainstorm all the issues that get in the way of them fulfilling or meeting the purpose they have just described. All the rubbish that gets in the way, all the things that don’t work as well as they should do, all the meaningless reports and meetings... They should write these on post it notes, one problem per post it note.

By this time they should be full of ideas, sometimes however it needs to be kick started. Think of an example of the bureaucracy that happens in your organisation and wind them up so they have a full head of steam; I am sure you can think of something. If you can’t here are a couple of examples from the Squawk Point that should get your mind working:

<http://www.squawkpoint.com/2010/02/next/>

<http://www.squawkpoint.com/2010/02/politically-correct/>

Group and choose:

Ask the group to look at all the issues that they have come up with and group them into common themes, and then get them to pick one or two, the themes that they feel they can do something about and want to fix.

Bad for business:

Get the teams to be explicit why the issue they have come up with is bad for business, is it costing money, wasting time, upsetting customers, what exactly is the problem that they are trying to resolve? Then they need to work out what **they** plan to do about it and what agreement **they** need from the sponsor to implement **their** plan.

There are a couple of words that I have emphasised; they are “they” and “their”. It is really important that the teams realise that nobody else is going to do this for them. It is all about what they can do for themselves.

I ran one of these sessions once and somebody started sniping from the crowd. “This is all very well but we have done this time and time again, we chat about all the things that need to be improved but nothing ever happens, management promise the world but never do anything, why is this going to be different?” The answer was simple, “This time management isn’t going to do anything, you are!”

With that in mind they will be expected to present back to the sponsor, to tell them what they are going to do differently. It is sensible to point this out upfront so it doesn’t come as a nasty surprise at the end of the event. I have been faced with the wall of silence before, nobody wants to stand up and be counted, but it is all about accountability, if they don’t feel strongly about what they have been talking about and don’t want it fixed then they don’t have to present it, but if they don’t then nothing will ever change. It is entirely up to them. I know that sounds a little harsh, but we are all adults, and when I point this out somebody always rises to the challenge.

Slide 11: how to report back

Often people won't have had the opportunity to present to a senior sponsor, so it is usually quite helpful to provide them with a structure to present back. The more you can structure it for them the easier it is to do. So here is a specific framework that follows the exercise they have done. For each issue ask them to:

Explain what the issue is:

Be clear and specific, ask for real examples and narrow it down to problems that can be isolated and fixed. It is one thing to talk about "poor communication" it is another thing altogether to say that the Friday afternoon teleconference call is not doing what is needed.

Why is it bad for business?

This helps contextualise the issue and makes it clear, avoiding any doubt. Is the teleconference call bad because it is boring and wastes everybody's time? Or is it bad because the numbers discussed are a week out of date so wrong business decisions are made? If at all possible get the teams to quantify the amount of pain an issue causes, be that in terms of time, money, dissatisfied customers etc. This all helps focus people's minds on the issue.

Potential solutions

The teams should explain what they plan to do and how they came to that conclusion. Again it is all about clarity, how that solution impacts the cause of that problem. What specifically do they plan to do?

A couple of obvious points here:

- Providing a solution to a problem is the key, just discussing problems without taking the initiative to do something about them is really not helpful
- The solution should be what they plan to do, not what they want somebody else to do for them, this is all about taking responsibility

What do you need?

This is the time to ask for what they need to take things forward. What support do they need? Do they need time, money, help from a specific department? What is it that they want the sponsor to give them? Now is not the time to be shy. As my mother always used to say to me, "if you don't ask you won't get."

Slide 12: the big presentation

The final part of the event is the presentation back to the sponsor; this is where the teams ask for agreement and if necessary resources to put in place the solutions that they have come up with.

Ask the teams to present back one at a time, what do they want to change and why?

The sponsor's responsibilities

Funny as it may sound this can be every bit as stressful for the sponsor as it is for the people doing the presenting. They are standing up in a room full of people and will be expected to make decisions without all the information they might like. On one hand they won't want to pour cold water on ideas that their staff feels strongly about, but on the other hand they won't

necessarily want to agree to ideas that they feel are poorly presented and not thought through as well as they might be.

It is a tough gig.

Your role is to make it as straightforward a job as possible for them by making sure that things go smoothly. You can do this in a number of ways:

- Make sure that the sponsor is thoroughly briefed on what to expect, how the teams will have arrived at the presentation they are making and what the rules of engagement are. Particularly make sure that they realise that the onus will be on the proposers to take forward the solution, not the sponsor.
- Make sure that the teams presenting back to the sponsor all do it in the same format. This will help the sponsor get his or her mind around the issue faster and give a more grounded response. Make it easy for the sponsor to get the information that they need in a digestible format. Think of it like driving a car, if the sponsor knows where the break and accelerator are they will drive more smoothly, changing the pedals around does nothing for accident reduction, and at the risk of overusing my metaphor the last thing you want is a car crash of a meeting.
- Let the teams do a dry run of the presentation to you, help them to be as specific as they can be in framing the problem, solution and help that they need.
- Make sure the sponsor knows that they can ask as many questions as they want to, they should get all the information that they can from the presenters to help them make a decision.

It is important that the sponsor makes a decision, what is not acceptable is for them to go away and “think about it” or to ask for a “business case” or some other diversionary tactic to stall activity. If they don’t like something, that is fine, better than fine if they provide a rationale for that decision, a decision is fantastic, even if it is a no. If however they duck the issue everybody in the room will know that they ducked it, that won’t help morale one little bit, you would have been better off not running the event at all.

Take the manager through the decision that you want them to make, what the outcomes should be, either:

- Yes, that is a good idea get on with it or
- No, I don’t want to do that and why, or option three
- Yes but, with a specific request for further action. “Yes but could you let me know what Mike in Engineering thinks?”

If the sponsor agrees to a proposal it is a nice touch to get them to sign the flip chart that is was written up on, somehow that makes things more formal.

You will have a number of small improvement projects that the sponsor has agreed to, things that the teams can take and run with.

At the risk of stating the obvious make sure you capture all the outputs from the session; these will be the basis of future project work. Thank everybody for their time and contribution and then adjourn to the nearest watering hole.

That's it

You have finished, you will have achieved three things:

1. Opened your staff's eyes to what is really going on around them, how much time and effort they waste and what the opportunities for improvement are.
2. Highlighted to your sponsor the biggest opportunities for improvement in their department, these can form the basis for future project work
3. Defined a list of small improvement projects that can be started now.