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Got an Effective Problem-Solving Culture? These three critical elements will ensure that you do.

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A recent article published in *Quality Digest Daily* pointed out that to foster a problem-solving culture, managers must serve as mentors and cultural leaders—building the systems and atmosphere that support and encourage team members at all levels to problem solve effectively.

That is absolutely true. However, once these problem-solving roles are understood, truly developing an effective problem-solving culture will require the following three elements:

1. Adopting a formal, standardized problem-solving methodology for the organization

2. Integrating the formal system into the organization in a way that capitalizes on existing roles, responsibilities, and systems

3. Embracing a change management process to ensure people have the training and coaching to accept and perform new problem-solving functions

1. Adopt a formal, standardized problem-solving methodology

Establishing a standard methodology for the organization as a whole brings synergistic benefits beyond the skills of the individuals. If the methodology is developed and deployed well, problem-solving benefits will include:

A common terminology. Speaking the same language leads to more accurate communications and fewer misunderstandings.

A common paradigm from which all problems and solutions are approached. Commonality creates efficiency, which leads to quicker results.

Greatly improved ability to problem solve effectively in teams. On the surface, problems might appear to be isolated occurrences, but events leading up to the problem often cut across departmental

and disciplinary boundaries. Therefore, finding the most efficient, cost-effective solutions dictates that expertise from these various sources work in teams.

The ability to assimilate new employees in the middle of a problem-solving session in a "plug and play" manner. New members will be familiar with the steps in the process and will be able to quickly integrate and contribute during an ongoing investigation.

Economies of scale when training employees in the methodology. This will reduce per-employee training costs.

Let's look at a hypothetical incident involving the manufacture of an off-spec batch of fertilizer. On the surface, this would appear to be strictly a quality assurance problem, but it might be discovered that the bad batch was affected by a lack of preventive maintenance on a blender, which in turn was caused by an IT breakdown in the preventive maintenance scheduling. It would be difficult for the quality manager—or quality department for that matter—to develop the most effective solutions on its own. These would likely come from a team that includes members from quality, maintenance, and IT. In this way, solutions would take into account the needs, strengths, and limitations of everyone involved.

As this example shows, when dealing with more complex problems, the levels and fields of expertise needed to troubleshoot the issue will not be known until the various events leading up to the occurrence of the problem have been identified. At this point, experts—and others with ancillary knowledge of the problem—must be brought into the process of finding workable solutions.

Everyone who has gone through the standardized training will be able to apply their full energy to immediately solving the problem at hand instead of trying to decipher the thought processes of the problem-solving team and how it is approaching the problem. Having in place an organization-wide, structured methodology with a common terminology and approach to problems, and a systematic investigative process, makes this all much more simple and efficient.

2. Integrate the problem-solving method into the organization

Developing your program through an interactive workshop is the fastest and most efficient approach. The goals and benefits of the workshop are as follows:

Develop the program promptly and deploy it swiftly. Time is money, and it is important to maintain momentum. The faster the organization can identify, develop, and deploy the elements required to

operate a standard methodology, the faster program benefits add to the bottom line. New initiatives will have supporters, skeptics, and even detractors. The quicker the program begins to generate results, the more confident and active the supporters will be. Skeptics will begin to buy in, and detractors will find fewer reasons for resistance. All of this greatly increases the likelihood of program actualization, which, once again, benefits the bottom line.

Workshop participants must be key root cause analysis (RCA) program decision makers. A key objective is to develop the program in a manner that capitalizes on the existing strengths and available resources of the organization, and that can be launched in the shortest amount of time without cutting corners or leaving things to chance. Because the interactive workshop focuses on making these critical decisions, workshop participants should include those responsible for the success of the program (i.e., champions), those having the authority to delegate needed resources (sponsors), and those whose employees will have job-duty changes. Ideally, it should be conducted by an independent facilitator with expertise in both the problem-solving methodology as well as program design and development. It is important to assign resources to the program based solely on the needs of the program, and not on any self-serving interests.

Take stock of existing roles and responsibilities, as well as technical infrastructure, and build upon it. The objective is to comprehensively satisfy the design and development and operational needs of the program while using to the fullest extent existing systems and positions. This approach conserves precious resources by avoiding the creation of redundancies and new bureaucracies. Outcomes should include consensus agreement on necessary organizational changes in roles, responsibilities, operational infrastructure, and responsibility for each task. Additionally, the workshop should outline a comprehensive training plan for employees tasked with the different elements of the new problem-solving methodology. Depending on the size of the organization and the formal problem-solving methodology chosen, new roles and responsibilities can either be met by creating new positions, or through changes or additions to existing duties. In either case, the program champions should ensure that change management is a part of the process early on for the reasons discussed below.

3. Take a formal approach to managing change

Research by the Prosci Learning Center clearly reveals that most failed initiatives can be chalked up to a lack of planning for the human reaction to the change, and not to the validity of the initiative itself. Change management—the science of dealing with the human element—is quite often overlooked whenever new

initiatives are undertaken that involve changes in job duties and responsibilities.

An effective change management strategy should include the following elements:

Clearly define the initiative sponsors and their roles in the process. Lack of visible sponsorship is a leading cause of initiative failure.

Gauge the organization's change readiness. Every organization has a history of change experiences that will influence how any new initiative will be viewed and accepted by its employees. This condition is referred to as "change readiness." Knowing this history is critical to customizing the change management plan to the organization's needs. Organizations that have had a successful history of change and are not currently overwhelmed with new initiatives would be considered "change ready" and as such, will need less change management planning than those that have a history of past failures, or that are presently bogged down with new programs. Change readiness is most accurately measured through a survey completed by selected members of the organization, usually in the design and development workshop**.**

Develop a thorough communications plan. Once the decision is made to adopt a standard problem-solving methodology, there should be a general announcement from the organization's leader explaining the reason for the change, the expected benefits, and the added short-term sacrifice needed to get there. General communications should then continue as the program begins to take effect, with specific emphasis on sharing successes so that understanding and support builds. Simultaneously, communications should occur regularly between program coaches and their protégés to foster constructive feedback as those with new responsibilities begin using the new methodology.

Identify the departments and individuals whose job duties will be altered by the addition of the new RCA program. These individuals will be the primary focus of the change management plan.

Identify people who will perceive themselves as "losing" from a successful implementation, and plan to proactively address those sentiments. There will always be some resistance to change, so anticipate it and build in a structure to manage it.

Develop a comprehensive training schedule for those who will have new RCA program responsibilities. Properly trained employees will present less resistance because they will have more confidence in their ability to carry out their new duties.

Set up defined coaching relationships for those with new duties. It is very important that newly

trained individuals know specifically whom to go to when they have questions or need help with their new duties.

For maximum effect in the shortest period of time, it is imperative to decide on a standard methodology for the organization, deploy the program rapidly, and attend to the human element required for success. Paying attention to these three pillars will bring the most value in the shortest time to maximize program return on investment.

A version of this article was published when our team was known as Apollo Associated Services.

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