



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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For a Perfect Landing!

Does only the end matter?

Key Learnings:

- Review the prerequisites for sound process performance
- Pay attention to the finer aspects to ensure perfect process outcomes
- Recognize the importance of eliminating problems at source

Amazing differences of 0.1 point or less in scores separate top gymnasts in the Olympic games, leaving audiences puzzled. Despite giving a power packed display of balance and poise, most of the gymnasts, be they new comers or experienced, tend to falter while landing. Now, severe and crunching deductions are made for a poor landing. The question is: Why is the emphasis more on the landing? To the untrained eyes of the audience, the performances are perfect except for the landing. However, there are several minute flaws that occur during the performance, which the gymnasts correct on the spot. Though most of these mistakes go unnoticed, the corrections eventually accrue and emerge during the dismount, leading to poor landing.

In other words, the landing reflects the inherent soundness of the entire performance. Hence gymnasts need to first focus on minute flaws accruing through the performance before aiming to master the art of perfect landing.

Business gymnastics!

The same is the case with business organizations. Most organizations have landing problems like the gymnasts. These could be in the form of late shipments, frequent or long repair times and many other installation related issues. It is these downstream activities that have straightforward requirements and strong links with customer satisfaction. Thereby they are first to be identified as problem areas. Most organizations exhort the employees closest to the customer to 'do things right'.

Now gymnasts can improve performance faster than organizations, as they can feel the unevenness in their efforts and refine them, thus eliminating the source of recurring problems. On the other hand, business routines involve several people and processes. Often employees fail to see the local causes of problems that emerge further down the line. Unless these are corrected fast, they get carried on to processes towards the end. Eventually, despite receiving several wrong inputs, the last process is expected to deliver a flawless output to the customer.

Obviously, identifying and correcting local problems requires participation from people throughout the process. This apart, it calls for management attention and leadership by knowledgeable problem-solvers. Remember, outcomes are the residuals of the entire process. Thereby organizations should stop emphasizing on the landing only and instead focus on the accruing problems.



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A case study!

A leading manufacturer of industrial equipment found that late parts shipment was a never-ending customer complaint. Customers ordered replacement parts to maintain, repair or upgrade their equipment, but they never received them on time. This did not happen due to lack of focus or negligence. The CEO himself took up the issue of timely shipments and exhorted the parts team to do better. Despite all this, the problem persisted every quarter after an initial lull.

Then the CEO took up a novel measure. He empowered a senior manager to take complete responsibility for parts shipping. The manager did not have a special team or budgets and resources allotted. He leveraged a common culture, tools and a problem-solving attitude to identify underlying problems.

Soon the causes for late shipment emerged. It was clear these issues were not in the realm of the parts team, which was blamed until then. The order entry process was inconsistent and erroneous. Many parts were engineered inaccurately and sourcing problems caused manufacturing delays. Once the senior manager identified these weak areas, he worked to overcome them. Gradually the parts flow gained speed and the process became smooth. The order to delivery cycle time dropped and lowered inventories.

The efforts that went in were significant but brought about the desired value. Customers took quick notice and appreciated the company's efforts. With this word-of-mouth, publicity increased and sale of new equipment shot up. Customers that switched loyalties began to come back slowly.

In this context, we come to the term 'process management' which has been in vogue for several years. The irony is that this concept is often misunderstood and is used to refer to any work activity. The process approach contradicts 'piece-meal' thinking. It focuses on the complete sequences of tasks rather than on individual tasks themselves. In short, the approach looks at the 'totality of work'. A process can be formally defined as 'an organized group of related activities that work together to create customer value'.

Customers care about results and to achieve best results, we need good processes, not disjointed individual tasks. For instance, what matters most to a customer is that he receives the goods he has ordered. He does not care how a company plans its delivery or allocates inventory and which team is responsible for it.

Now would you say that everything in a gymnast's performance was perfect but the landing? If so, you will have to pay more attention to the finer nuances of the performance to understand the complexities. Likewise, organizations that focus on exhorting the tail end for enhancing customer satisfaction, sooner or later, will hop, jump or fall with poor output. Customers, meanwhile, would have jumped to better-performing competitors.