

Process and Product

By ANN LATHAM

Missed another deadline? Scrapped another part? Scrambling to do rework? Why is it so hard to get reliable, repeatable results from what seem to be straight-forward requirements and well-defined processes?

There are five keys to getting results, and the trick is to find a cost-effective balance among these five. Unfortunately there is no magic wand to help you find the right mix, but if you evaluate your processes relative to these five, you will likely discover ways to increase the stability of your processes.

Pick an area where you are experiencing less than desirable results and review the situation in light of these five: **competence; training; documentation; process controls, and inspection.**

Competence

In order to get predictable, repeatable, quality results, you must have competent people performing all critical tasks.

Everyone strives to hire competent people but even if you do it well, it doesn't mean the capabilities you hired last year are the ones you need this year. Nor does it guarantee that the people with specific capabilities are assigned appropriately. It may be time to look at how you manage employee competence.

Do you know what capabilities your employees need to perform their jobs well?

- Are they well-defined and documented?
- Do you hire according to these capabilities?
- Do you track capabilities and

performance sufficiently to ensure employees aren't assigned to tasks without the required capabilities?

- Do you manage organizational changes relative to the alignment of organizational needs with employee capabilities, not only across your organization as a whole, but also relative to specific employees?

Training

Qualified people can still fail if they do not know enough about the company's goals, their responsibilities, and how things are done at your company.

- Do your employees understand key objectives and their roles and responsibilities?
- Do they understand key requirements and interfaces of the processes they touch?
- Do they know where to find the information they need?
- Are procedures, and changes in procedures, carefully communicated?
- How do you teach new skills and how do you know employees have mastered the material they have been taught?
- Training often invokes images of traditional classroom sessions which can lead to forgetting about the purpose of training when no formal classes are scheduled. Think more broadly. Employees need clarity of purpose, clarity of roles and responsibilities, clarity of method, and clarity of data.

Documentation

People can't know and remember everything. Accurate written

information must be readily available for your employees to do their jobs well.

That said, documentation may be the most misused of the five keys to getting results. People often act as if writing is communication. In addition, many companies spend significant time and money developing content and consistent format, but give little thought to how a document will be used. Before leaping to the decision to document, give the other four keys serious thought.

Also:

- Who will use the document?
- How will your document be used? Read cover to cover? To look up a detail? As a checklist to control every operation?
- When will the document be used? Infrequently? During every operation?
- Where will the document be used? At a desk or under a machine?

Process Controls

Process controls include any means of ensuring things are being done as they should be done – as employees were trained, as documentation specifies.

The list of possibilities is nearly endless. Be creative. Fairly standard ideas include observation, reviews, milestone checks, gateways, checklists, templates, data analysis, best practices such as 'measure twice — cut once,' and peer review. Even better are mechanized controls – devices that physically prevent flawed product from moving forward. A list of questions to consider here could go on and on:

- What are the most likely sources of errors and inconsistencies?
- How do you ensure appropriate consistency from group to group and employee to employee?
- How do you prevent gradual erosion of procedural method or technique?
- How do you ensure proper execution of infrequently performed tasks or tasks performed outside an employee's main area of expertise?

Inspection

Inspections test or examine products for flaws. Inspections are usually, though not always, the least cost effective method of ensuring results. If everything is good, they add no value. If something is wrong, they trigger rework or scrap. Nonetheless, inspections are often necessary. In those cases, it is best to inspect as early in the process as possible so good money is not thrown after bad.

Putting it Together

If you're not getting the results you desire, review the relevant process relative to competence, training, documentation, controls and inspection. If the right people are doing the right things at the right time with the right information, the results will be good.

Ann Latham is President of Easthampton-based Uncommon Clarity Inc., a firm that helps companies achieve their business objectives by translating operational complexity into manageable action and results; (413) 527-3737; www.uncommonclarity.com