

School Lunches: Quality Improvement

Description

The students at Nonnewaug High School in Woodbury, Connecticut, proved that by using a structured quality improvement process and quality tools, they could solve a chronic problem—its cafeteria food. Not only was the food “really gross,” but the cafeteria had operated at a loss for years. It had very few customers.

A student quality improvement team was formed to solve the problem. The team designed, pilot-tested, and conducted a comprehensive customer satisfaction survey to learn exactly what the students and faculty wanted from their school cafeteria. The team learned why some used the cafeteria and why others did not. It discovered an increasingly sophisticated customer who wanted a variety of good tasting foods and beverages, offered with a friendly smile.

By using a graphical representation of its findings (flow diagrams, charts and graphs), the team convinced the administration that there indeed was a problem. The team made several recommendations to improve the quality and variety of the food and beverages, and to improve the friendliness of the staff.

The results have been impressive: instead of avoiding the cafeteria, the students and faculty are using the cafeteria. Even outsiders are now coming to the school for lunch. Improvement in both the quality and variety of dishes has resulted in a 30 percent increase in utilization. After operating at a loss for years and years, the revitalized cafeteria recently reaped a monthly profit of \$4,000.

Learning Points

The structured quality improvement process has broad application in all types of settings. Quality methods and tools apply to all types of industries, manufacturing, service, healthcare, and of course, education.

By using quality tools and methodology, chronic problems (“gross” cafeteria food that led to operating losses) can be diagnosed and solved. Any place of work should *continuously* look for ways to improve its processes and systems.

Measurement and statistical analysis are effective tools to overcome defensiveness. The graphic presentation of data assures that the message can be heard and action taken to eliminate the problem.

By understanding the real needs of customers, you can assure that the product or service you develop can deliver on the benefits customers expect.

Discussion Questions

Question: Do you have examples from your own organization where the needs of the employees or customers have changed, but the same old products, services, or processes are the only offerings?

Answer: Responses will vary. Most organizations will have examples of outdated products or processes that no longer meet the needs of customers and/or employees. These examples are excellent candidates for a quality improvement process.

Question: Are there any examples of “cafeteria food” in your organization? What chronic problems continue to exist unresolved? How might you use the quality improvement process to find a creative remedy to the problem?

Answer: Responses will vary. By following the quality improvement process, a quality improvement team can understand the problem fully and uncover its causes. As a result, it is likely to develop a remedy that will eliminate the problem forever.

Question: What techniques (in addition to a survey) might be effective in collecting information about customer needs?

Answer: Responses will vary but may include the following.

- Asking structured open-ended questions that usually start with: How?; In what way?; Can you tell me more?; Describe....; What?; and Can you give me an example?
- Conducting focus groups (with groups of customers) can provide an accurate picture of what is important to those customers. Usually, feedback from one customer will stimulate comments from another, providing richer information than can be obtained in a questionnaire alone. The focus group facilitator can easily probe for more details by using follow-up questions.

Question: The high school students used quality tools to convince the school administration that a chronic school lunch problem existed. Have you experienced a situation in your business or personal life where you tried to bring a problem to the attention of others, only to be met with defensiveness and resistance?

Answer: Responses will vary. Probe: What was the situation? What action did you want others to take? How might the graphic display of data have made your argument more compelling?

Question: What can quality tools help you do?

Answer: Quality tools contribute greatly to the success of quality teams as they tackle difficult problems. By collecting and organizing data with the help of quality tools, patterns and trends emerge to shed new light on problems.

Question: What quality tools were used by the high school improvement team? What additional quality tools have you used to help solve problems you have encountered in your work?

Answer: The high school quality team used data collection (survey), brainstorming, and charts and graphs (bar charts and pie charts) to help them collect and analyze data. There are many other quality tools available to solve problems, including histograms, Pareto analysis, flow diagrams, stratification, scatter diagrams, location diagrams, and box plots.