

## Opera Workshop: Quality by Design

### Description

Ideally, a college or post-graduate education expands a student's mental faculties while at the same time providing adequate preparation for the student to succeed in a career of his or her choosing. There are certain educational tracks that appear well-designed to inculcate the neophytes to the rigors of the chosen profession while weeding out those less suited to perform the required tasks adequately. Graduate degrees in law and medicine are typically bestowed upon students who have faced up to challenges similar to those awaiting them in their respective fields.

Until recently, the performing arts industry has not had the benefit of an educational system suitable to prepare students to meet the challenges and requirements of a post-educational career. Samuel C. Welch, an adjunct faculty member in Xavier University's Department of Music, is working to remedy that situation.

Welch's business experience and background in performing arts, specifically as an opera singer, prompted Xavier to hire him for the purpose of deploying his knowledge of quality management principles in the academic field. The first product of this blend of quality management and education is a body of knowledge known as Requirements Based Learning (RBL), a program which Welch is still developing.

The RBL pilot case is the Xavier University Opera Workshop, which is continually redesigning and improving its curriculum in response to dismaying employment figures in the performing arts industry. One year after graduation, only 59 percent of performing arts major have found *any* full-time employment. For opera singers, the numbers are even less encouraging. Only 19 percent of all classical professional performing artists are employed full-time, which means that the performing arts education industry has an 81 percent failure rate.

Welch's RBL program intends to change that. As a start, the opera workshop partnered with Xavier's business school to design a questionnaire that would elicit from opera industry employers their needs and interests—those skills and characteristics that are the basis for their hiring decisions. Fully 75 percent of contacted employers responded to the survey, indicating a strong desire that these characteristics become more readily available among prospects in the talent pool. A follow-up survey asked the employers to rank those characteristics in order of importance while also rating their level of satisfaction with the music school's current curriculum.

Meanwhile, student-run focus groups with successful opera performers, opera executives, and veteran opera observers, allowed the students to engage in detailed, in-depth discussions on the barriers and aids to success in the opera field.

Based on survey results and input from an informed student body, a new curriculum was developed. Measures were designed into the process to chart the students' progress. Performances were videotaped to facilitate accurate evaluation against the new criteria.

The redesigned curriculum has improved the educational format for all concerned parties. The students have a clearer understanding of their goals and the steps required to attain them. The faculty and university have a heightened sense of fulfillment in helping students prepare for the real world. Finally, opera employers are finding more qualified candidates coming out of the opera workshop. With results like that, RBL performances may soon be coming to a Performing Arts Center near you.

## Learning Points

By placing the needs and desires of customers (the opera employers) first, Xavier University's Opera Workshop assured that the curriculum it redesigned would better prepare its students for opera positions in the real world. Through the surveys and focus groups, the students involved the customers in the curriculum planning and design process by asking them about their hiring needs. When we listen to the needs of the customers and then design our products or services to meet these needs, we promote greater customer delight and loyalty.

## Discussion Questions

**Question:** How could a structured quality planning process help your organization provide superior products and services?

**Answer:** Quality planning helps to:

- identify the customers of the new good or service
- develop the good or service that will meet those needs most effectively
- develop a process that can deliver the good or service as it was designed, both effectively (with fewest deficiencies) and efficiently (with optimum resource consumption)
- develop process controls that will maintain the designed-in quality
- transfer the process and its controls to those who will operate it on a routine basis

**Question:** Has your organization ever designed a new product with the use of leading-edge technology?

**Answer:** Most will not have involved the latest technology in new product development. Probe: What are the benefits of using the latest technology in new product development?

**Question:** The Xavier University Opera Workshop made a systematic effort to involve "customers," i.e., the students as well as potential future employers of those students, in the development and design of the new curriculum. However, in a recent study of health care organizations, only a small percentage claimed to have used customer input in designing new services. Even worse, only a slightly greater percentage even intended to use customer input in the next three years. Why do you think it is so hard for some organizations to include customer input in designing new goods and services?

**Answer:** Many organizations feel that they have some specialized expertise that the customers lack. Customer input would be uninformed and useless. They forget that these are the same "uninformed customers" who will make the decision on which services and goods to purchase.

**Question:** What are the benefits of providing a product that meets *all* of your customers' expectations?

**Answer:** Customer loyalty results in increased revenue and market share achieved by building repeat sales and attracting more business from delighted customer referrals. Customer loyalty also results in shrinking costs since loyal customers will return repeatedly on their own; advertising and marketing costs are not incurred. The costs of acquiring and servicing new customers and replacing old ones are not incurred.

Another related benefit from customer loyalty is employee retention because job satisfaction increases. This retention has a direct, positive impact on the bottom line: Retention improves productivity and avoids the costs of hiring and training new employees. All of these decreased costs contribute handsomely to the organization's profitability.

This *does not* mean that each and every good or service has to meet *all* the needs of all of the customers. Many companies have very successfully stratified the market and provided customers with exactly the features and quality dimensions the customer needed without having to pay for many things the customer did not need.

**Question:** What products or services do you know of in your organization that were introduced without consideration of the needs of the customers, e.g., “We know this product is best for the customer, even if the customer does not know it yet”? What happened?

**Answer:** Responses will vary. Probe: What could have been done to prevent the problems? What should be done differently next time?

**Question:** Why do quality deficiencies exist in our products or services in the first place?

**Answer:** Many times, we do not do an adequate job in understanding our customers’ needs and then translating those needs into the product or service we develop. The result is that quality deficiencies are designed right into the product or service because we have not understood our customers’ needs. In other cases, the capability of the production process itself fails to deliver the product specified.