

The Culture of Measurement to Drive Continuous Improvement

“Data is our friend” is a slogan we state in quality and was heavily promoted by gurus like Dr. Deming to get people to completely embrace PDCA thinking.

This culture we are after reminds me of a something a good engineering friend said to me once that you must “inspect what you expect.” I never forgot this simple statement. Oddly enough we were talking about raising our kids, but it applies to this topic as well!

Companies have cultures, shaped by the beliefs, values and “unwritten” rules that shape and mold those who work there. For better or for worse, culture promotes certain behaviors, while suppressing others. Here are some cultural attributes that might suppress measurement for the purpose of driving continuous improvement:

- Competition between leaders and managers; this may cause them to report certain things, and not report others
- Blaming things outside our control; the “them” and the “you” that seem to make up the rest of the organization outside or sphere of control.
- Incentives that cause data to be presented in mostly favorable ways
- Human nature- other than the news, who wants to stand-up and talk about the bad news that is under their stewardship. Sometimes, it takes that new leader who’s willing to declare what’s broken as part of a plan to remediate performance during his/her tenure.

This list can go on, but you get the point. Can this be changes? Certainly, with time, respect and introducing some new paradigms. Some actions that change the culture in this area are:

- External benchmarking to know where “average” is and where “really good” is.
- Collecting and studying data trends, levels and patterns to gain “profound knowledge of the system” (as Deming said)
- Implementing a system of “balanced” scorecards, measures that are key to strategic competencies.
- Developing a “we are in it together” attitude; we work in a system, not a set of silos.
- Asking “What can we do to improve?” rather than defending why it got where it is.
- Routine use of PDCA and other improvement methodologies tools and disciplines.
- Start in one area where success is likely, and let it naturally spread from there.

This culture is the platform upon which our quality management system rests. One must be willing to see if it is sound and sustainable enough to support the system of QA/QC/CQI practices, or is it more like quick sand where progress is shaky or mediocre at best.

Investing in developing this culture in your team, department or company will give a gift that keeps on giving. Don’t overlook culture as a key part of your impact as a quality professional.

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