



Improving Employee Productivity and Efficiency

By David Childs, Ph. D.

The Dallas County Tax Office used four core quality management concepts to empower and inspire employees to “make the mission happen.” The results were impressive.

Twenty years ago, the Dallas County Tax Office turned itself into a laboratory to study what would happen if quality management principles were applied to help employees meet the organization’s goals. The office environment was transformed from one in which employees were unfocused and unmotivated into a “purposeful family” atmosphere, in which employees were made aware of the office’s purpose (and their purpose there), were empowered and inspired to “make the mission happen,” and were recognized and rewarded for doing so. Today, the Dallas County Tax Office can report that quality management principles work, and they produce dramatic results. The office is more efficient and productive, and customer service has improved. The Dallas County Tax Office has earned four national awards for quality management and, for the past two years, has been the only government entity to be recognized by Quality Texas, patterned after the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Program.

While numerous books about quality management and leadership argue that there are eight, 11, or 13 “secrets” to quality management, there are really just four core concepts:

1. Have a clear, well-understood mission.

- 2. Empower staff to individually do what is needed to “make the mission happen.”
- 3. Measure results to determine how successfully the mission is being executed, or not.
- 4. Adapt, constantly fine-tune, and improve.

These practices require little in the way of time and resources, but they generate dramatic benefits in real-life office environments.

IT'S ABOUT THE MISSION. PERIOD.

From the moment a job applicant enters the office, the Dallas County Tax Office makes it clear that everything is about the mission: to provide quality citizen service. A large poster of the office mission greets applicants as they enter the front door. During the interview process, applicants are asked if they had noticed the poster as they entered the office, and they are asked to explain what the mission statement means to them. Applicants are also asked to write two essays describing a personal memory of when someone was compassionate to them and when someone went out of their way for them. If hired, they sign a contract that they will “live the mission.” They are taken on a “welcome to the office” tour that includes pointing out every poster of the mission that hangs on the walls throughout the office. It is made clear

that every decision the office makes regarding promotions, discipline, annual reviews, bonuses, etc., is based on how successfully each employee personifies and promotes the mission.

An employee receives a “Mission Maker” thank-you letter if he or she gets a verbal or written compliment from a customer; or a “Mission Focus” counseling form if a customer makes a complaint, a manager observes the employee responding to a customer in a less than enthusiastic manner, or if he or she interacts with fellow employees in a less than professional or constructive manner. Usually, employees are reminded of their application essay about someone being compassionate or going the extra mile for them. Thus, employees are constantly reminded that the office is serious about accomplishing the mission.

HIRE ACTUALIZERS AND EMPOWER THEM

When hiring, look for what psychologist Abraham Maslow called “actualizers.” Actualizers are positive, can-do, self-starters. If you intend to empower staff to make the mission happen, employees will need to thrive on their authority and maximize it in a constructive way. Actualizers possess six tell-tale personality traits. They are positive, happy, active, confident, energetic, and sophisticated. When interviewing applicants, look for these traits in their facial expressions, body language, attitude, and responses.

The most revealing question that can be asked in an interview is: “Tell me about your last three jobs and last three bosses.” The answer the applicant gives

is probably what that person will be saying about you and your organization after they’ve been with you for six months. The answer you want to hear is that they liked their boss and co-workers, enjoyed the company, and are proud of the specific contributions that they made. Applicants who speak positively, constructively, and professionally about previous employers, co-workers, and work environments are much more likely to become positive, professional contributors to your organization.

At the Dallas County Tax Office, employees are fully empowered to “serve the customer, within the law.” They are also encouraged to “serve the customer, then do the paperwork” and to “interpret laws and statutes as favorably for the customer as legally possible.” Staff are empowered to create property tax payment plans for citizens, and they may call other states to resolve confusion regarding vehicle titles and registrations. They may decide to accept a check — and the responsibility for it — even without the recommended customer and bank account verification information. They may keep the office open until all customers are served. In short, they are empowered to legally serve the customers. Period. Should mistakes or bad decisions happen, or unacceptable legal interpretations be made, management takes external responsibility while internally using the error as an opportunity for constructive learning, training, and fine-tuning. The office’s philosophy is that occasional glitches, created by empowered over-exuberance, do not create nearly as many problems or obstructions to performance as those that would be created by an office full of bureaucratic robots.

POSITIVE COUNTING

In recent years, many organizations have created performance measurement cultures, but those efforts have often focused on reducing rather than improving. This can lead to a top-down negative, punitive, slash and burn approach that employees perceive as an “us against them” battle. It puts the organization at war with itself, and the result is that the measures damage morale and performance rather than inspire improved productivity and customer service.

The Dallas County Tax Office, on the other hand, has had great success at implementing measures in a positive, teamwork-inspired environment. The goal of the performance measures, like everything else in the office, is to make the mission happen. The measures are designed to monitor how well the mission is being achieved, and they are used to reward staff whose performance exceeds benchmarks. The focus is positive: Are we succeeding? What can we do better tomorrow? Who needs to be recognized and rewarded? A team of top management, middle management, and staff develops, monitors, and modifies the measures as needed (generally due to legislative or technology-induced changes in processes).

The improvements in productivity inspired by this approach have been impressive. In the Telephone Unit (a staff of 13 employees who answer an average of 22,000 inquiries per month regarding property taxes and motor vehicle titles and registration) over the past five years the same number of staff have reduced peak-season average call-waiting time from more than eight minutes to a little more than three minutes. The number of times telephone staff

exceeded their monthly performance targets increased from only five times for the entire year of 2003, when the program began, to 78 instances by 2007 — an average of a little more than six employees per month exceeding their targets.

In tax collections, over the past 12 years, 45 cities and school districts within Dallas County have contracted with the tax office to collect their property taxes. Not only is the Dallas County Tax Office collecting these additional accounts with no increase in staff, but existing staff also reduced the peak-season payment process time from two weeks to two days. The improved productivity also increased interest earnings by \$12 million.

Finally, in motor vehicles, performance targets were implemented in 1998 and an average of 16 motor vehicle staff (of a total of 120 employees in the department) exceeded the standard each month. By 2008, an average of 54 employees were exceeding the standard each month. The average number of titles issued per employee improved to 5,378 in 2008 from 4,382 in 2001. The average number of registrations issued per employee improved to 16,221 in 2007 from 12,554 in 2001. The average time to process mailed-in registration renewals dropped to two days from two weeks, while the average time customers spent waiting in line for renewals dropped to 8 minutes from 48 minutes.

Overall, over the past 20 years, fewer staff are doing three times as much work, and doing it faster. The office is more efficient, having actually reduced staff by four people, to 230. Consequently, while significantly improving performance, the Dallas County Tax Office has maintained a 20-

Awards and Recognition

2008 Quality Texas (Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program) Recognition

2007 Quality Texas (Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program) Recognition

2005 Texas Association of Assessing Officers Quality Customer Service Award

2005 Texas Association of Counties Exceptional Delivery of Service Award

2002 National Academy of Public Administration E-Governance Award of Merit

2001 National Association of Counties Achievement Award

2000 Texas Association of Counties Best Management Practices Award

1995 National Association of Counties Achievement Award

1995 National Transportation Association Best Public Service Video Award

year gross budget average annual increase rate at a modest 3.3 percent — including raises, increased health-care costs, technology costs, inflation, and so on. Comparable county agencies have seen average annual budget increase rates of 10.92 percent and 11.47 percent.

And at the same time, personal complaints to the tax collector about quality of service over the past 20 years have dropped from five per day to one per week. Meanwhile, unsolicited written

compliments have increased to 221 (18.5 per month) in 2007 from 24 (2 per month) in 1998.

CONTINUAL FINETUNING

The Dallas County Tax Office also developed a process to generate suggestions for improving the organization. The program, called Fit for Service, conducts a retreat for managers, assistant managers, and staff representatives to periodically (every 2-3 years) elicit creative recommendations on how to make improvements in 12 areas. The ideas generated at these meetings are collected, reviewed, and turned into a to-do list. Staff members are assigned to make them happen, and projects are implemented over the 2-3 year cycle. The office newsletter provides updates about the progress of each project. The 12 areas are:

- 1. Office Environment.** What improvements would enhance the organization's goal of maintaining a "purposeful family" environment?
- 2. Development and Training.** How can the organization improve on training, developing, empowering, and encouraging its employees?
- 3. Communications.** Walk a mile in your customers' shoes. How can we improve their experiences with the office's telephone, Web, fax, and other services?
- 4. Equipment.** What enhancements are needed to maintain reliability of office equipment (chairs, photocopy machines, file cabinets, etc.)?
- 5. Forms and Signs.** Again, keep the customer in mind. How can forms, office signage, the Web site, etc. be made more customer friendly?

6. Audits, Laws, and Regulations.

How can laws, regulations and audits be streamlined so as not to obstruct the mission?

7. Relationships. How can the organization's relationships or partnerships with other public and private organizations better accomplish the mission?

8. Space. How could the way the organization uses its available work space help to prepare it for space demands five years from now?

9. Supplies. Is inventory clean, organized, and available?

10. Technology. How can the organization's technology be made more responsive and user friendly?

11. Additional Opportunities. How can the organization adapt management approaches that a staff member might have witnessed in

another organization, or read in a magazine, or observed in the grocery store? Be alert for revelations.

12. Meditation. Allow employees to rest, reflect, meditate, and renew. Creative revelations occur when staff are physically and mentally rested, and have time to think, plan and be creative.

In recent years, about 60 percent of office staff have contributed almost 200 recommendations, 75 percent of which have been implemented. These ideas have significantly improved the office's performance.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to quickly improve an organization's efficiency and productivity by as much as 20 percent by following the four steps tried, tested, and fine-tuned

by the Dallas County Tax Office. Constantly focus on the mission; hire and empower the right people; develop 3-5 measures that monitor whether the mission is being achieved, and reward quality performance; and implement a program that helps the organization continually fine-tune its procedures. Remember that it's about the mission. Period. ■

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