

Case Study Survey of Management Execution

THE SITUATION

A division of a large medical products company was surprised to discover through a routine employee survey that there was considerable dissatisfaction with the dimension of “execution.” Even more unusual, management rated this area much lower than employees. It was surprising that the group who is most charged with getting things done is the most critical of it. This is unusual, management usually gives higher ratings in surveys than employees. We were asked to determine what is inhibiting the company from executing and implementing projects and work efficiently. Also we were charged with determining the underlying reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with projects and processes. The client needed to understand the scope and underlying causes of management frustration.

THE SOLUTION

This type of study is best accomplished with a focus group format. Focus groups provide the opportunity to interview subjects in depth about the issues and to probe causes and potential fixes. The design of a study of this type needs to be carefully planned. Execution had to be carefully defined and broken out into over twenty sub-components. We built a series of handouts and conducted over a period of two weeks 9 focus groups with members of management, making certain to have a representative sampling of departments, functions, locations, and experience with the company. We had to provide strong anonymity assurances because of the nature of the topic. In a study of this kind, it is wise to deploy handouts that are collected so that we can fully understand opinions should there be panelists who are reluctant to be openly critical in front of their peers – a very likely situation.

THE RESULTS

We successfully uncovered a number of problem areas where the management team, at multiple levels, felt that execution was poor. Project and product delays were rampant and often the result of poor planning or not following defined processes. The change process was cited as being mostly broken. We found excessive signature loops that didn't add value created significant delays. We provided an executive briefing to the senior Leadership Team and presented clear information on what was most problematic and which processes were the best candidates for repair. Although there were many negatives in the reports, we also found examples of successful practices that could be emulated. Negative results should always be accompanied with a clear plan of action and illuminated first steps that provide senior management with clear actions. Remember, knowledge comes from being provided with data that can be readily

understood and deployed to action. Two change teams have been empowered and are chartered with developing a series of actions and new behaviors to improve execution.

SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED

It is very important, in a research project like this where there is known negative information, to design the study and reporting in a way that it informs but does not overwhelm or discourage the client. This does not mean sugar coating the facts or putting a “spin” on the problems. Uncovering what the problems are is important, but the real value to the client is knowing where the problems lie and what their causes are. A sound change methodology should always be part of the reporting and recommendations. Too many survey efforts just end up as a dump of information. This is not helpful, and in fact can be harmful if it demotivates. Human motivation is important to consider in the action planning phase. Most change efforts fail, not because of poor plans, but because the motivation to change falters.