

Using Process Maps to Shrink the Customer Chain

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Many manufacturers have become frustrated with the lack of success of their Continuous Improvement program. Even after great expenditures of time and money, they are not seeing the contribution to the bottom line that they have been led to expect.

Graham Process Maps are an outstanding tool that can not only revitalize Continuous Improvement but also provide the best way for a manufacturer to initiate such a program.

Start with the Map

Starting improvement projects with a process map is important for four reasons. First, it causes the people in the business to agree on the process that is used. While this may seem obvious, the task is often quite difficult as there are often disputes as to what actually happens. And there are almost always overlapping and redundant tasks in any manufacturing process that are hidden until a team takes the time to review each step in thorough detail.

Once agreed to, the steps are then mapped. When the Graham Process Map is used, it provides a quick method to obtain a clear picture of the process. The second reason the map is important is that this picture provides the simplest way for the people who use the process to comprehend just what is actually happening at every step. Trying to verbally describe what goes on in a manufacturing business can be almost impossible. But when mapped, even people who have no familiarity with the process in question can see how things are done. This saves tremendous amounts of time and debate.

Third, the map allows a chance to identify simple improvements that can be made easily with very little expense or delay. Such “low hanging fruit” allow improvements that are not only powerful but are also required prior to moving on to more significant changes in a process.

Fourth, the map now provides a record of the current state as well as the future state after improvements are made. This allows for effective comparison to measure success in the projects that are undertaken.

Mapping the Time

The Graham Process Maps also have a unique feature that makes it a very powerful tool for improvement: the ability to capture times at each step of the process. A Graham Process Map allows the user to record times for both the operation as well as the delay prior to completion of the step. When combined as a total time, this provides the basis for making effective improvements throughout the Customer Chain.

The Customer Chain® Improvement Process

The Customer Chain is defined as

“The connection of all the activities from the initial customer contact to the delivery of all desired products, services, and support.”

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The ultimate improvement in a manufacturing business comes from examining every link in the Customer Chain® to reduce not just the direct time (signified by the point where each link touches) but also the time it takes until the operation is done (the space inside the link). All the wait time in the chain represents indirect costs, which are usually 4 to 8 times as much as the direct costs. But often, these costs are ignored because they are hard to see. Graham Process Maps provide the most effective way to visualize this loss of time and are vital to the Customer Chain® Improvement Process, which is performed in five steps:

- 1) Objectives: What results do you want?
- 2) Current State: Where are we now?
- 3) Action Plan: What should we do?
- 4) Implementation: Do it!
- 5) Evaluate: How are we doing?

Mapping is a critical component of Step 2 by creating an effective way to see what is currently happening in a process and helping to create the most effective target for improvement. Maps are then used again at Step 5 to verify the success of the change or recalibrate the program if the desired results aren't there.

Process Mapping and Time-Based Strategies

The ultimate tool for improvement is to use the data from Graham Process Maps within the Customer Chain® Improvement Process to implement Quick Response Manufacturing (QRM). Companies that attain this level of Continuous Improvement have shown the ability to dramatically reduce lead times and create significant savings while providing the ultimate in customer service.

Graham Process Maps can then provide a means for employees to examine their processes routinely and find new ways to make improvements on their own. When guided by the goal to reduce lead times, an “Improvement Generator” emerges to continuously create effective change throughout the business.

Bill Ritchie is the Owner and Principal of Customer Chain Consulting LLC, which he founded after more than 25 years implementing lasting improvement as a manager for General Motors, Stanley Works, and Textron. Bill is a certified Quick Response Manufacturing (QRM) trainer and his company website is www.CustomerChainConsulting.com. He can be reached at (937) 344-8300.