Using Process Improvement Teams

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Teams are core components of a company’s quality system. Whether the team is for process improvement, safety, or food safety and sanitation, teams are critical in the development and implementation of effective programs.

The fundamental purpose of establishing a process improvement team is to improve the internal efficiencies of the company, product quality and service quality. Improvement is done through the efforts of the team members to improve methods, productivity and quality. When companies use teams to improve processes, employees are more likely to accept change.

Assigning the Team

After selecting a process improvement project, a team is assigned to work on the project. Management defines the charter, or purpose, which sets goals and objectives for a team, scope of the work to be performed, membership, resources available and establishment of a deliverable. The charter defines a direction without solving the problem. It should identify the first items required for a team to be successful and a clear vision of what needs to be accomplished.

Facilitator/Leader

Select a key person to keep the team focused on the purpose and objectives. Without a good facilitator/leader, the team will fail! The leader is chosen by management and is empowered with the purpose and objectives to be accomplished. The leader will:

- Clarify the objective of the team.
- Have an agenda and follow it.
- Manage the action items.
- Facilitate problem solving.
- Have direct access to management.
- Plan the next meeting and agenda.

The facilitator should have a list of action items documenting the goals to be completed, team member responsible, and a completion date. It is important to update action items at each meeting.

Important: Team members should complete goals, not the facilitator.

Team Members

A good team consists of a diverse group of people who work well together. The team must include people who have appropriate knowledge of and experience in the improvement area. If packaging-line efficiency is the process to be improved, include at least one of the operators on the team. Teams should be formed based on the individual’s knowledge of the process. The team must be empowered to plan, organize and complete work within a time frame.

Team Norms

Keep in mind, when new teams are formed, four stages of adjustment naturally occur; manage appropriately.

- Forming – New members come together and try to figure out how they fit. At this stage, clearly define the purpose and why each member is on the team.
- Storming – Members are comfortable with expressing their opinions. Accept that this stage will pass; keep members focused on purpose and goals.
- Norming – Team starts to work together and members become focused on their purpose and input.
- Performing – Mature team with a clear focus. Achievements are being recognized with a focus on the purpose and goals.

Successful teams have:

- Clear team purpose and goals.
- Ground rules used to monitor and improve the team.
- Detailed action items that define tasks, clarify roles, responsibilities and time to completion.
- Clearly defined empowerment so members know which decisions they can make.
- Clear and open communication between members and management.
- Well-defined decision procedures that help the team know which decision-making approach to use.
- Balanced team participation such that the decision making is not dominated by strong personalities.
- Well-planned and executed meetings with clear agendas.