

Beyond Results... Sustaining Performance

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Rarely is failure rooted in lack of knowledge, ideas, or even an ability to plan.

Most companies that remain viable and healthy beyond a decade understand their markets, competitors, and capabilities reasonably well. So, why do companies fail? More often, organizations that continually lose ground or fail altogether do so because they don't know how to - or refuse to - collaborate and coordinate internal capabilities effectively to first, attain results and, second, to parlay that ability into sustained performance. Working to attain a singular result, whether defined simply or complexly, often stops short of allowing the organization to achieve the most valuable benefit from any new initiative: sustainability.

Sustaining performance, the highest level of the results hierarchy, is the most overlooked competitive advantage that any organization could hope to realize. Organizations assemble skills, processes and procedures to do something, such as manufacture and sell a product. Pretty simple. But companies don't make one product or the same product forever. They have to innovate and improve baseline processes constantly.

Improvements can be anything - internal or external; directly or indirectly related to the company's product or service. These projects feed energy into the business process to create, replenish or accelerate competitive strength and momentum. Satisfying the project objective and meeting budget and schedule commitments are important and sound measures. But, frankly, these measures alone don't guarantee value.

WHAT "PROJECTS" REALLY DELIVER

Projects, initiatives, or however you refer to activities designed to secure or improve the business, are not single events. Their impact can extend well beyond the project's end if senior management and project leaders assess performance on a long-term basis.

One example is upgrading a manufacturing line to support the launch of a new product line or line extension. Here's how it'll happen: you'll determine what the marketing folks are looking for and define requirements in terms of product features, performance attributes,

components, packaging and handling. After the product definition is confirmed, you'll determine the technical resources and begin thinking about changes to the manufacturing line, along with costs, timelines, scale-up assumptions and other considerations. The project manager details a well-defined plan that identifies all of the important tasks to be accomplished, the timeframes, interdependencies, project leadership and implementation structure, resource responsibilities, and the vital critical path. The project is initiated and proceeds on time and on budget. Ultimately, the revamped line is re-started, process parameters are verified and the product is inspected to ensure conformance to specifications and marketing requirements. Great! ...Pop the champagne; your project is done. Or is it?

Most who understand project management know that a project or program has a defined beginning and an end. However, in many cases, such as the above, the finished project can and should be viewed not as a single event, but rather a catalyst that has the poten-

tial to deliver value well beyond what was anticipated. If new processes are designed and staff is trained to follow them to deliver against a target, and if those processes were successful, they can be applied repeatedly for other projects across the company. Thus, one project can influence the culture to adopt or reinforce a true continuous improvement mindset.

In the end, sustainable performance is the only true measure of an organization's competitive ability. It's the scorecard to the leadership team. Superficial fixes and short-term performance enhancers are widespread in the current business climate. These tactics, along with the quarter-to-quarter sales mindset, create finite results, not sustainable performance.

In the manufacturing example, the business won't see value until the line produces a product that generates revenue. Then, performance needs to be sustained for the company to get a payback on the investment. Nonetheless, the case can be made that the project was successful once the line produced a quality product. Projects end with an event. Businesses succeed with sustained performance.

How many times have you experienced projects that created solid, re-engineered processes and promised to deliver improved efficiencies, yet ended up on a shelf? There have been plenty, introduced with a bang... then fizzled, with value never realized.

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE

So, what is required to attain sustainable performance? As already noted, establishing the ability to get results – to execute reliably to achieve a desired objective – is the predecessor to sustainable performance. Yet, you can progress from a purely results-driven organization to one that is sustainable performance-driven.

Before a New Project Begins: explain in easily understood terms the reasons behind an initiative; explain competitive influences; make competitors real, not some ambiguous opposing force; and define and communicate the project's ultimate business value potential.

During Project Planning and Implementation: acknowledge existing processes and work tendencies that must be abandoned or modified and explain why; acknowledge cultural/environmental tendencies that are obstacles and establish new behavioral ground rules; involve and train stakeholders in developing the solutions (new processes) that will deliver the initiative; develop direct correlations between

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individual responsibilities and the associated impact on the process and its ability to generate value, and between responsibilities and acknowledgements/rewards; provide focused facilitation to help individuals and groups to understand what will change as the result of the project; and create and reinforce a collaborative environment through leadership example and behavior.

After Project Completion: measure and reward sustained improvements rather than the ability to create a one-time result; provide the means for process application feedback and improvement; communicate impact (value generated) of the new process on the business; and seek ways to make successful project practices a natural tendency throughout the company.

As always, the responsibility for creating and maintaining sustainable performance lies with the organization's leadership team. What is important to the company's leaders will be important to the organization. How the team collaborates as a group then will determine overall organizational cooperation... and sustainability. ■

EASY AS 1-2-3

Three essential components, if integrated, lead to attaining results quickly and sustaining improved performance:

1. **Process.** Evolving a new process from a company's existing process to effect change or designing a new process from a zero-base.
2. **Discipline.** Ensuring the ability of individuals and teams to deliver to targets.
3. **Leadership.** Providing facilitation and inspiration to the team.

*As published in the June 2004
Global Cosmetic Industry Magazine*