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Great Quality Consulting: Improvements must be connected to external results

by Greg Hutchins

Quality consultants are everywhere and are proliferating like dandelions. At an ASQ section meeting I attended this year, half of the attendees were consultants trolling for clients or offering ISO 9000 services. What's going on?

Many quality professionals were downsized as their functions were operationalized. Some retired, but others jumped into consulting. In my next few columns, I'll be surveying and discussing what makes a successful consultant.

Performance enhancement is hot. Take a cue from major technical and professional associations. ASQ and the American Society for Training and Development incorporated performance improvement into their mission statements.

What is performance consulting? It is broader than simple quality consulting, which may focus on total quality management, continuous quality improvement, statistical process control, quality auditing, ISO 9000 or the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

Document impact on customer satisfaction

The future for quality consultants won't rest solely on their ability to improve processes, design interventions or give advice. "Improving processes or even improving internal performance is not sufficient if we cannot connect the improvement to external results--specifically [if we cannot] document the impact of the improvement on customer satisfaction," says George Reid.

Reid teaches the popular ASQ workshop "Skills for the Quality Consultant" and is the principal consultant with the Performance Design Group in Sarasota, FL. He offers some valuable thoughts and suggestions for those who want to position themselves as successful performance consultants. "Performance consultants focus on improving business and organizational performance, regardless of their expertise or specialty. Performance consultants may deal with quality, organizational development and effectiveness, training and human performance technology. Performance consultants avoid quick fixes and instead build on systemic, fundamental solutions to organizational problems," says Reid.

Add real and measurable value

Performance consulting comes down to adding real and measurable value to key internal and external customers. Value may mean enhancing product reliability,

improving customer responsiveness, shortening product development cycles or adding important product features--all while reducing overall costs.

All of the goals in the last statement are real and measurable. Often internal or external consultants improve processes, solve problems, teach new skills or coach teams. But how are these benefits measured? A consultant will often add value to the work of others who are more directly involved with adding value for the final customer.

"Performance consulting or value-added consulting requires that consultants assess the value of their consulting interventions in terms of critical business results. In reality, we often engage in activities as consultants without even establishing or measuring the impact on internal performance," says Reid.

Consulting tips

In conclusion, Reid offers the following tips for launching a performance consulting practice:

- * Guarantee your work and, if possible, promise results.
- * Create the conditions necessary to put your expertise to work by negotiating for what you need to do good work.
- * Listen and learn along with clients.
- * Avoid quick fixes; instead build systemic, fundamental solutions to organizational problems.
- * Don't just solve problems, but also teach clients how to manage and solve future problems.
- * Diagnose problems systemically, looking at all the factors that may affect successful implementation of a solution or innovation. These include motivational factors, skill development and other characteristics of the work environment.
- * Incorporate benchmarking/best practices and learning from exemplary performers.
- * Stick with clients and their problem through all phases of the project (definition, planning, implementation and evaluation) until the problem is fixed.
- * Apply your expertise in implementation planning and change management.
- * Give clients direct and affirmative feedback on how they are managing the problem environment.

- * Support clients and encourage their own internal management systems.
- * Evaluate the success of implementation, and along the way make changes necessary to achieve results.

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