

The Key to Consistency

“Wow, look at that, it turned out exactly the way I wanted.” In some fashion I have heard that said many times. There are usually two questions that come with that statement: “What did I do differently to get that result?” and “How can I make it happen every time?” Well, you may not like McDonalds, but you must admire their ability to make a Big Mac in Florida taste like a Big Mac in Illinois. They do this by process.

There are many ways to pass on a process. The one that we are all familiar with is word of mouth. To me this is a marginal way to pass important information. Two weeks ago I told my 3½ year-old son to get his shoes tied before running around the house. Like most word of mouth processes, the information did not transfer well. The next day I was holding a crying 3½ year-old. Again, I explained the need for a shoe tying process. I hoped that with the added personal experience, this time it would take. As of today he is good on the shoe tying.

In the above story what was the difference? The second warning came with some participation on his part. In the last 10 years I have made process participation a huge part of the teams I manage. I have found that I need to manage less often and that we are more consistent. We achieve this with a process meeting and a process chart.

I stumbled upon the process meeting years ago when I began working in the Reinders Service department. The repairs were done well, but the details surrounding them, like scheduling, order processing, and customer notification happened in different ways. I tried developing the system myself and forcing the participants to execute it, but the results were poor. Judging from the complaints I received, I had talented people doing the work, but we could not seem to get all of the details right for the process. We needed to get the whole team working in the same direction at the same time. This is when we had our first of many process meetings.

In a process meeting you get all the key players together and develop a process with their input. Here you, as a manager, need a little trust. You cannot use this as an opportunity to thrust your opinions down their throats. You need to let them handle the details. You gently advise them and log the steps for later use.

For the logging of the steps, I first ask the team how we do the process now. I have large strips of paper covering the wall they are facing (you will need a good amount of room). I let them tell me how they do it step by step. I log each step on a sticky note and put them in order on the papered wall. After this is done, I ask if this is the ideal way to do it. When we all agree it is not, I say, “OK, let’s fix it.” Start at the beginning and let them fix it. This is where you cannot force them. If you do, you will not have their commitment. It will not be their process. You will have their compliance only, and you will need to manage it every day. Begin by moving or adding steps with sticky notes until you get the ideal process that creates the consistency you desire. Once done, you will use this diagram to make a process map for each team member.

From there I use a computer program called Visio to make a copy of the process map we created on the wall. The program is easy to use. It will only take you a little while to copy the map. I have taken these maps, printed and laminated them, and given them to the team members. We use the maps when there is a breakdown in the process to show where the breakdown occurred, and then we fix it. I have also given these maps to new employees for training. They use it as a visual when they are performing their tasks. You get better performance so much faster than before.

To be consistent you must have a map of the ideal process. There is a time investment to this method, but the value is incredible. The best part of it all is from the manager’s point of view. You will now have the team’s commitment to a process, because they were the ones who developed it. Best of all, you will have a way to show them the breakdowns in the process, and you will do less managing in order to get a consistent result.

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