CREATING AND SUSTAINING
A QUALITY IMPROVEMENT EFFORT IN A UNIVERSITY

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November, 2001

For four years the School of Business and Public Management at The George Washington University had a Quality and Innovation Initiative under the leadership of Dean David Fowler. Four committees were eventually established -- on education, research, public service, and facilities maintenance. Faculty, staff, and students were surveyed for their opinions and suggestions, and several improvement projects were conducted. This report describes the committees, or process improvement teams, that were established, how they operated, a few of the improvement projects that were conducted, the challenges we faced in carrying out the improvement effort, and what we learned.

Introduction

A Quality Initiative Steering Committee was established in the School of Business and Public Management at GWU in September 1994. Although the school of management, and probably every organization, is constantly trying to improve, the quality initiative was an effort to learn process improvement methods and to apply them to the management of the school of management. The activities of the steering committee were just some of the efforts undertaken to improve the School under the leadership of Dean David Fowler. Other efforts were conducted in the Dean's office and in the Executive Committee. I was the faculty facilitator of what came to be called the Quality and Innovation Initiative for the first three years. There was also a doctoral student facilitator – Eric Dent during the first year, Susan Goldberg during the second year, and Janine Clarke during the third year. Five doctoral students, many faculty members, and many staff members worked on this initiative. Dean David Fowler guided and provided encouragement and support. When David Fowler's term as dean expired, an interim

dean continued the committees, though without graduate student involvement and support. Under a new dean the quality improvement effort has been continued by task forces on the same subjects and some new subjects.

The experience at GW -- in the School of Business and Public Management, in the GW Hospital, and in the University as a whole -- is similar to experiences in other organizations. An administrator can initiate a quality improvement program but changes in leadership can bring changes in level of support. Usually each person in an organization is committed to some vision of how the organization can improve. But the explicit use of quality improvement methods (which are thoroughly consistent with empowerment and increasing customer and employee satisfaction) seems to require deliberate, sustained effort by the faculty.

The First Year, 1994-1995

In September 1994 there was one committee, the Quality Initiative Steering Committee. The committee began its work by brainstorming areas of greatest need for improvement within the School. We surveyed students, faculty and staff to learn where they thought improvements were most needed. We published an occasional newsletter that reported on improvements. And we conducted three training programs during the summer of 1995 for faculty and staff. Occasionally speakers were brought in from other organizations. Three projects illustrate how we worked – audio/visual equipment, access to telephones, and building maintenance.

Overhead Projectors

A survey of the faculty revealed many complaints about overhead projectors that did not work. Overhead projectors were the standard teaching technology in the School in 1994. When they did not work, faculty and students were frustrated and the presentation of material in the classroom was disrupted.

A process improvement team was formed. Conversations revealed that the staff of the audio/visual office was concerned about the rapid rate at which overhead project bulbs were burning out. Hence, spare bulbs in the overhead projectors had been removed in the belief that being near a burning bulb was reducing the lifetime of the spare bulbs. As a result, when one bulb burned out, there was no spare bulb in the machine. To check this assumption, we called the manufacturer who said that the lifetime of the bulbs would not be significantly reduced by being near a burning bulb.

Consequently, we put spare bulbs back into all overhead projectors. A second survey of the faculty a semester later indicated very few complaints about non-functioning overhead projectors. At very low cost – a few more bulbs – a major frustration of the faculty and students was eliminated.

Improve Access to Telephones

In 1994, before cell phones became common, students often had difficulty finding a telephone to make a call between classes. They had to choose between not making a call or standing in line for the phone and missing part of class. Only three public telephones were available in the school of management's buildings. From 5:30 to 6:10 p.m. there were often ten or more people wanting to use each phone. Phones in faculty offices were not supposed to be used after 5 p.m., when most graduate classes are held. Admitting students to faculty offices created security concerns.

A process improvement team found that the local telephone company would install pay telephones at no charge, since the cost of installation would be covered by the use of the telephones. A study was made of where the additional telephones should be located. After the telephones were installed, an informal survey of students indicated great satisfaction with the increase in access to telephones.   This change cost the university nothing but increased student satisfaction, reduced security concerns, and eliminated a source of tension between students and office staff.

Building and Facilities Maintenance

People were confused about who should be notified regarding building repairs, such as leaky faucets, non-functioning windows, or broken furniture. Many people would report the same problem to many different people. There was a feeling that repairs were not being made promptly.

A process improvement team consisting of members of the quality initiative and members of the University's maintenance staff met and decided on a preferred flow of communication about needed repairs. Problems would be reported to department office managers who would report the problems to a coordinator in the dean's office.   The coordinator would inform the maintenance staff.   Faculty and staff throughout the School were told to contact their office managers when they found a maintenance problem.

Repairs began to be made more promptly. There was less confusion about how to report problems. The coordinator in the dean's office now receives monthly computer printouts on repairs that have been made (Umpleby and Goldberg, 1996). However, awareness of the new procedures seems to be fading. So, we are now suggesting that the office managers meet with the coordinator in the dean's office at least once a year to remind people about the reporting system and to discuss how it might be improved.

The Second Year, 1995-1996

During the second year we added three committees: Education and the Student Experience, Research and Faculty Development, and Service and Community Involvement in addition to the Quality Initiative Steering Committee. The Education Committee designed a uniform course feedback form to obtain comparative information across departments within the School. That proposal was debated at length by the faculty. The outcome of the debate was a resolution that each department would obtain course feedback from students to instructors in some manner.

The Research Committee distributed a survey on faculty development. The intent was to understand better the stages in the career of a faculty member and the kind of support most needed during the various stages of a career. This survey led to more support for young faculty members in terms of access to computers, course relief, and summer research support. The intent is to give the junior faculty more time to develop courses and to publish articles in order to win promotion.

The Third Year, 1996-1997

The feedback form proposed by the Education Committee evolved into a mentoring program. Faculty members who taught similar courses were encouraged to work with each other to improve their courses. The focus shifted from evaluating the faculty to helping them to improve the educational process.

The Research Committee conducted a survey on how faculty members use technology. One concern that surfaced was that more people should be involved in deciding what the next steps in information technology should be rather than turning those decisions over to the technologically most knowledgeable people.

As the projects we undertook became larger and more complex, we began to use a specific improvement method, FOCUS PDCA. The acronym stands for: Find a process to improve; Organize a team that knows the process; Clarify current knowledge of the process; Understand causes of process variation; Select a process improvement; Plan a test of the suggested improvement; Do an experiment with the suggested improvement; Check whether the suggested improvement actually produces the expected results; and, if so, Act to implement the improvement more widely in the organization.

The Challenges We Faced

Any effort of this kind involves learning by all concerned. Quality improvement efforts require a change in communication, and most of the challenges we faced concerned communication in some form. For example, there were discussions about whether recommendations from the committees had been followed up by the Dean's office. One committee in particular was concerned about the recommendations it had submitted at the end of the second year. There was a meeting with the Dean and Associate Dean to discuss the recommendations that had been made. It turned out that many subsequent decisions had been made in accordance with the faculty's recommendations, but these actions had not been clearly reported to the faculty. Some changes are easy to make, but some require additional resources or reorganization (Umpleby and Clarke, 1997).

Information seemed to be lost during transitions from one academic year to the next. So, we learned to plan transitions by appointing committee chairs and doctoral student facilitators well in advance of the coming academic year.

Some of the doctoral students recommended that we "deal with organizational culture directly." What they meant was that we seek to obtain a widespread commitment from the faculty to using quality improvement methods in improving the School. Some faculty members thought that the suggestion was to start a movement within the School, somewhat like establishing a new ideology. They said they were not interested in joining a movement. They *were* interested in defining problems, solving problems and learning how to solve problems better. But a new language, or a movement, was not of interest.

Another challenge has been reorienting the School from a preoccupation only with education to a broader focus on education, research, and service -- the standard concerns of a research-oriented university. One way that we dealt with this challenge was through the names of the three committees. Originally the names of the committees were the Classroom Experience, Faculty Development, and Student Services. These names imply that education is the sole activity of the School. By naming the committees Education and the Student Experience, Research and Faculty Development, and Service and Community Involvement, we succeeded in shifting attention to the broader perspective of education, research, and service. This shift in orientation is consistent with the fact that we now have many more Centers and Institutes in the School than we did in 1994 (www.gwu.edu/~sbpm).

In general the staff was more receptive to the quality initiative than the faculty. The staff saw it as a way to improve efficiency, reduce frustrations, and be heard. Faculty members have been more skeptical. In particular, there has been resistance to incorporating quality improvement methods in the curriculum. So, our strategy has been to use these methods to

improve the performance of the School. Then, when faculty members are more familiar with what the terms mean in practice, it is hoped that these methods will be included in core courses rather than just in elective courses. Although progress has been made in winning recognition of the usefulness of quality improvement methods in the management of the School, so far there is no consensus that these methods should be taught as part of the management curriculum. On this issue a long-term perspective seems to be required (Umpleby, 1993 and 2001).

The reasons for faculty skepticism about quality improvement are mostly due to misunderstandings of what is intended. One faculty member said, "A key feature of quality improvement is reducing variation. In a university that would mean making everyone the same. However, we do not want everyone to be the same, so we don't want quality improvement." A few people said that quality improvement is just a euphemism for layoffs. "That is the way it works in corporations. But we do not want to lay people off. So why do we need it?" One person said, "It is based on statistics, but that is not my field. So it does not concern me." And many people said, "It is a fad. It will pass. Just wait it out, and it will go away" (Umpleby, 1997). These early interpretations of the quality improvement effort have changed, and attitudes are becoming more positive.

What We Learned

We learned several things as a result of the quality initiative.

1. Significant improvements are possible at little or no cost.
2. Education of faculty and staff is needed to explain what is intended, what process improvement methods are available, and how to use the methods. Faculty members in a school of management seem to be reluctant to view process improvement methods as something new. They say, "We are always trying to improve." When they do see these methods as a coherent body of management knowledge, they tend to view them as something outside their field, rather than as an enhancement or extension of their field. We did observe an increase of interest in improvement efforts, but interest in improvement methods as a part of management knowledge seems to come later.
3. Process improvement teams greatly aid the activities of surfacing suggestions, generating innovations, and conducting experiments. If there is no process improvement team, innovations tend to be the responsibility, and burden, of the innovator. If a process improvement team exists and approves a suggestion, all the resources of the organization are made available to test and implement it.
4. Given the different priorities of different academic administrators, faculty commitment to using process improvement methods is required in order for their use to continue in a department, school or university.

Achievements

Despite skepticism among a few, there have been numerous successes. Under the Dean's leadership the School formulated a mission statement, which we did not have before. We created a three-year plan, which we did not have before. We created a structure to implement the three-year plan. That structure is the three committees -- education, research, and service -- since the improvement of education, research, and service is the way the three-year plan is organized. There has also been a lot of program and curriculum innovation. We used comparative data to develop a strategy to raise the School in national rankings, which we had not done before in a deliberate way.

One sign that process improvement methods have been accepted is that faculty members have begun to use the committees to advance their own personal agendas. This is just what we want. The faculty is beginning to take ownership of the committees. Change is now approached in a different way. In the past faculty members would advocate their views in faculty meetings, hoping to persuade others. Now process improvement teams analyze, brainstorm, strive for consensus, experiment, make recommendations, and follow through with implementation. It is a more systematic approach to changing the processes within the School.

Lately I have been urging the use of "quality improvement priority matrices" as a way of increasing data-driven decision-making (Umpleby and Naoumova, 2001; Umpleby and Melnychenko, 2001). Simply presenting data can be an effective way to promote organizational change. One way to transfer the practice of using "quality improvement priority matrices" from one university to another might be to have two student groups work together on a project via email. Each student group would conduct a survey on their campus. The students would work together via email to create the survey and process the data (Umpleby and Makeyenko, 1995). If faculty members and students learn process improvement methods by improving their universities, it probably will not be long before they begin to use these methods with local businesses and government agencies.

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