

Teaming Up to Solve Problems — Fast

GE calls it “Work-Out,” North Shore LIJ Health Systems calls it “Fast-Track Decision Making.” Whatever you want to call it — you should also call it successful. The “it” referred to here is a process where groups of managers, employees or both come together to solve specific business challenges. It is a quick and simple yet powerful approach for solving problems and eliminating bureaucracy with the involvement of those who will ultimately implement the decisions.

North Shore–LIJ Health Systems has applied Fast-Track Decision Making to address issues such as reducing overtime, patient identification, improving RN hiring cycle time, implementing new HIPPA regulations and more. Alan Cooper, vice president of the center, says “FTD has changed the way we work in the health system.” While they started using external consultants to establish the process in January 2003, they now have about 40 people who are trained to facilitate FTD in addition to their current roles. Here’s how the sessions work:

Bring people together.

Sessions can be held with a small group of people or with 100 or more that represent different functions, levels and geographies to bring in different thinking. Team leaders are also selected to help guide the facilitation process. A design team is generally used to plan and prepare for the session.

Present them with a business challenge.

Having a clear goal helps to focus participants appropriately. The objective should not be too broad, nor should it be too narrow. The goal should be important to the organization and something that participants and sponsors will be passionate about.

Trust them to come up with new ideas.

In small teams, participants apply tools and techniques to facilitate brainstorming, evaluate solutions and develop action plans. Trained facilitators keep the participants focused on identifying the issues and push back to promote creativity.

Issues are then categorized and assigned to teams to brainstorm potential solutions — crazy, radical, sane, major or minor. Next the teams cluster ideas, assess the potential impact of each and select the best alternatives.

Generally the teams will come together as a large group on one or more occasions during the session to compare and provide input on ideas. The top recommendations are decided upon and assigned to teams to develop high-level action plans and a presentation for the executive sponsor.

Get a yes or no decision right away.

A “town hall” meeting is then held where the teams present their recommendations to the executive sponsor and his/her panel of advisors. Anyone present can ask questions, push back on the idea and give opinions. At the end of the dialogue, the executive sponsor then makes a “yes” or “no” decision on the spot.

Depending on the scope of the issue, the sponsor can be anyone from a department manager up to the CEO. The process does require working with the sponsor and other key leaders in the organization to educate them and gain their commitment to the process.

Implement and measure.

Each approved recommendation is assigned a project leader who is given the authority and

accountability for implementing the decision. Smart organizations put some emphasis here; many a great idea goes afloat in implementation.

Project leaders report on status regularly to the sponsor or his/her designee. Some organizations apply an “action learning” approach by requiring that teams have both developmental and business goals.

Celebrate.

Publicizing the results of changes made helps to encourage empowerment, prudent risk-taking and collaboration as well as giving recognition to those who generated or implemented new ideas.

Savvy organizations make this process a way of life.

The process is simple — but is not easy. Organizations should expect some resistance to change. If embarking on this type of initiative for the first time, it helps to work with someone experienced in implementing this type of approach. The company should also select a committed sponsor and a project with a good chance of success to achieve an early win to build upon.

For more information, refer to books such as *The GE Work-Out* (Ulrich, Kerr, Ashkenas) or contact Diana Rivenburgh at drivenburgh@tal-entpotential.com. ♦

DIANA RIVENBURGH

