

Johnson Controls' Three-Pronged Secret

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By early 2000, Johnson Controls Inc. (JCI), a global diversified technology and industrial leader serving customers in more than 150 countries, had met measurable success with its Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma programs. A leader in automotive seating, overhead systems, door and instrument panels, and interior electronics, Johnson Controls' continuous improvement team was effectively using Lean to remove waste and streamline processes and Six Sigma to remove variation and solve common cause problems – but for Joel Beezhold, Director of Continuous Improvement for Johnson Controls, something was still missing.

With an eye for operational improvement and better performance, Beezhold was always looking for ways to do things quicker and better. While Lean and Six Sigma were serving Johnson Controls well, there was a disconnect when it came to “special cause” process issues – special cause referring to variations that were unusual or not previously observed. “What we had for special causes from a continuous improvement standpoint was only what people were seeing from experience. It became clear that we were definitely missing the right approach to employ in these unique problem solving efforts,” says Beezhold.

Organized Common Sense

In late 2007, Beezhold and Johnson Controls turned to Kepner-Tregoe to fill the void. Kepner-Tregoe provides consulting and training services to organizations, building competitive advantage through a rational, systematic approach to achieving rapid, targeted results. Put simply, the KT process is about critical thinking – getting the right people to ask the right questions at the right time.

According to Beezhold, critical thinking questions do not have to be profound or philosophical – a critical question is something that substantially penetrates and isolates. “For example, if I want my children to determine the state in which I was born and they ask, ‘were you born in Alaska?’ that’s a question but it’s not critical. A critical question is efficient, such as were you born west of the Mississippi? Were you born north of the mason Dixon line? It’s about asking questions that limit the choices of what the problem can be — narrowing it down until you have clear, concise possible causes that you can action around.”

Sam Bernstine, a Principal at Kepner-Tregoe, explains it as “organized common sense.” Kepner-Tregoe focuses on training, coaching, and consulting with people to ask common sense questions that are in-depth and probing. They then can take those answers and organize that data in a structured way that helps find quicker resolution.

Three Legged Stool

Most everyone involved in a manufacturing environment has some level of experience with Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma, as both methodologies have undeniably revolutionized the manufacturing landscape.

However, Bernstine emphasizes that it is important that companies don't look to any one solution as a silver bullet to resolve all operational issues. From the start of Kepner-Tregoe's relationship with Johnson Controls, Beezhold and Bernstine discussed how all three tools - Lean Manufacturing, Six Sigma, and Kepner-Tregoe can support one another in trilogy.

"A lot of organizations I work with are in a constant search for the latest, greatest fad or the silver bullet, and we don't prescribe Kepner-Tregoe to ever be that alone," says Bernstine. "We believe there is data overload in most organizations so we focus on using the KT tools to cut to the chase and get to the real issues. The KT tools draw boundaries around what is relevant data versus what is not relevant data in regards to the issues at hand, thus improving the speed to resolution."

In order to perfectly marry critical thinking skills with the Lean and Six Sigma content, Johnson Controls "triple certifies" its continuous improvement team, executives, and team leaders. This decision has helped Johnson Controls' continuous improvement program tremendously, not only in scrap reduction and containment, but it has also made its Lean and Six Sigma programs better.

Transcending The Plant Floor

The Kepner-Tregoe (KT) rational process can be easily learned and understood at all levels of an organization. The power of KT rational process starts with the perfect marriage of existing organizational knowledge coupled with KT tools. Then, a coaching program is added to maximize success as well as sustain the critical thinking skills of the workforce.

Beezhold notes an extremely important by-product of the KT training: Many Johnson Controls employees are actually using the KT rational decision making process in their personal lives - to help their children choose colleges and to select family vacation destinations while also using the KT rational problem solving process to resolve their car problems.

Bernstine agrees. "These tools can not only be used to help companies resolve business issues around critical concerns such as productivity, quality, and cost, but can also transcend into people's personal lives and enhance the quality of their lives outside of the job."

This transcendence was pivotal for Johnson Controls, because it meant its employees truly had buy in, ownership, and commitment towards rational thinking and thus, successful problem resolution.

The JCI Foundational Secret Weapon

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Many organizations are familiar with the Ishikawa Fishbone, or cause-and-effect, method of solving problems. This method begins with a problem, then identifies possible causes by separate categories that branch off like the bones of a fish. While effective in some scenarios for generating possible causes, this process also means you have to consider every material, method, machine, and environmental factor and test which of potentially hundreds of “bones affected the outcome.” By adding Kepner-Tregoe to your thinking process, you can eliminate many of those bones early on by using the KT process to more effectively and efficiently evaluate against these possible causes with the KT facts of the problem specification.

The key is to be more efficient. The most successful organizations can not only effectively solve problems, but solve them quickly. “Speed for us is differentiation. It is a competitive advantage,” says Beezhold.

The ROI for Johnson Controls comes in the application. It’s not just about training employees. After training, employees must execute projects and then projects must be evaluated and results demonstrated.

And Johnson Controls definitely has the results to prove it. Johnson Controls won the Kepner-Tregoe International Process Achievement award for solving a software issue that ultimately saved the company thousands of dollars. The issue had lingered in a plant for over nine months, resulting in the replacement of countless parts while trying to solve the problem. Beezhold held a Kepner-Tregoe event in the plant and the team found the cause in one day.

Last year alone, Johnson Controls trained 450 people in Kepner-Tregoe and to date, those trained “practitioners” have turned in millions of dollars’ worth of KT-specific projects.

Johnson Controls has been one of the most effective Kepner-Tregoe clients in terms of integrating not only the KT tool with Six Sigma and Lean, but also incorporating it into their culture from an employee performance and business process standpoint. Johnson Controls is already a leader in continuous improvement, but now the company is leveraging this process into other departments within the organization such as Quality Control, Finance, IT, Maintenance, and Engineering. To do that, Kepner-Tregoe training has been added to the Johnson Controls training academies at their Leadership Institute.

Bernstine notes, “What excites me the most is that Joel and Johnson Controls haven’t just done this in North America, they’ve done it globally around the world, which transcends many different cultures but ends up being a common language across the globe.”

As far as Johnson Controls is concerned, Kepner-Tregoe is truly the secret weapon that was missing from the ideal three-pronged continuous improvement arsenal.

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