

TEACHING EMPLOYEES TO BECOME CONSULTANTS

BACKGROUND

Our client is an Australian company, a wholly owned subsidiary of a US chemical, construction and container products corporation. The parent company has an annual turnover of US \$1.5 billion and customers in 40 countries.

The Australian subsidiary manufactures packaging for fresh foods. Broadly, there are three types of products: plastic bags, plastic shrink bags, and vacuum sealed bags for exporting meats. Clients' logos are printed on the bags as required.

The company is located in Fawkner, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia.

OBJECTIVES

Management wanted to develop internal business improvement skills. They decided the educational program was to pay for itself – by selecting one aspect of the business and improving its performance with the aid of external consultants.

Our firm was appointed to the task. The department chosen for improvement was print and packaging.

KEY RESULTS

- Print set up times were reduced by 70-80 per cent, equating to approximately 16,500 print hours per annum. This in turn allowed deferment of the capital cost of two new printing presses.
- Lead times were reduced from 11 days to four (approximately 65 per cent).
- Productivity increased by approximately 35 per cent.
- The business improvement methods developed for print and packaging were adopted by the company and remain in use to this day.



The company took the task seriously. They advertised internally for staff to participate in the project – all of whom were to leave their current positions to become part of the implementation team.

The team of eight was divided equally, with half the company's staff, and half GPR Dehler consultants. The company's staff were from a cross section of the business, covering sales, administration and production and ranged from clerical to supervisory levels. GPR Dehler had overall responsibility for the program.

INSTANT CONSULTANTS

As with most programs of this nature, the first step was to gather information and map the processes. Our client's staff were given rapid training in becoming consultants to their own company. They learned how to observe work processes, review and critique them and how to present the results.

ARE WE REALLY THIS BAD?

The information gathering phase gave them more knowledge about their business than they had ever had. They were shocked by what they saw. Comments such as "I can't believe we operate this way" were commonplace.

They were looking at the business from a new perspective. They saw activities duplicated without purpose or justification. Trial print proofs were kept in three or four places – with no easy way to establish which one was correct. Enormous paper trails were discovered that led nowhere. A memorable moment was the discovery of a 600–700 page computer report. Written discretely on one of the pages were the words "if anyone sees this page I'll give them \$10". The report was several months old and no one had claimed the money.

ONE OF US, SO WE BELIEVE YOU

The findings were presented by the internal consultants to their colleagues. They were not always happy to receive the news, but they regarded the source as credible. This was strengthened by the fact that one of the team was an ex union representative.

NOW WE KNOW THE PROBLEMS, LET'S START FIXING THEM

Two of the biggest problems facing the department were set up times and lead times. The second being largely dependant on the first.

The team helped reduce set up times by 70–80 per cent, and lead times by around 65 per cent. This was achieved in part by sequencing runs from lighter colours to darker colours. And by ensuring the right skills were available at the right times.

HOW DO YOU GET AN INTERNAL TEAM TO DO THIS?

To work effectively, external consultants must be impartial and objective. Something even experienced professionals can find difficult. For employees operating inside their own environment and working with their colleagues and friends this is a very tall order.

Much of our time was spent managing the discipline of consulting work and ensuring communication procedures were faithfully followed. (GPR communicated with

senior management, the combined team communicated with middle and lower management, and the company's staff alone communicated with operators.)

We ran a one hour meeting each day to keep the company's consultants on track. This gave them the opportunity to air and address problems they had experienced the day before as well as preparing them for the problems they were about to encounter. During these meetings we equipped them with the tools to communicate the rationale, benefits and progress of change and neutralise some of the hostile comments and feelings from their co-workers. In the process creating changes in their own skills and capabilities so that they could do the same for their colleagues.

EASY ON PAPER

This project, like many of our engagements, looks straightforward on paper. The reality is far from it. Our skill is not just in identifying problems and designing solutions, but in making those solutions work - often in a tough business and cultural environment.

GPR Dehler has an excellent record of implementing change programs in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Europe, North America and Southern Africa. Everything we do is geared towards achieving results - not writing reports. We have the management and planning skills as well as hands-on consultants with experience to overcome obstacles and transform good ideas into effective and successful programs. Significantly, we do this with minimum disruption to our clients' business operations.