The Problem

A major customer, producing consumer electronic equipment, was concerned that they were not meeting market demand timeframes due to what they saw as a supplier being too slow to provide materials within their specification. I was asked by the supplier to help fix the problem.

Reframing the problem

It is easy to assume that the question you are asked to answer is the path to a quick solution. Not always the case. In speaking with the customer technical and sales people it was apparent that the reason for the specification was to ensure a consistent product for their end users. The use of *Lean* approaches like *Voice of the Customer* can help. Asking the question "why" a lot can often lead you to a different problem to be dealt with than what you, or the customer, originally thought.

The new problem then, when you broke it down, was ***"how can the supply chain provide products faster to the end consumer that are consistent?".***

This different question drives a different approach.

The methodology of *8D*, originally developed by Ford, promotes quickly placing in an interim measure to reduce the affect of the problem. The supplier agreed to placing a materials technical staff member on the customer production line to provide tactical response as needed while we worked through a longer term solution.

Thinking of the solution differently

The technical teams had applied a "one size fits all" set of technical parameters to all supplied materials; all to the tightest specification they could.

The consequence to the supplier was simple. They needed to manage their quality to even tighter standards to meet the customer demand.

By thinking differently, it was able to be demonstrated through *Six Sigma* statistical methods, including *Gage R&R* (showing that results were repeatable and reproducible), that the end consumer consistency requirement could be met with wider supply tolerances for some materials. In many cases, cheaper, faster, and without sacrificing other quality parameters.

By working collaboratively to develop quality standards by material type and class, everyone realised benefits. Supplier and customer came together to celebrate the success and to recognise the hard work and achievements of those involved.

And there was cake!

Our Conclusion

A happy customer is one who feels that they are being listened to and supported. By working first to understand the customer concern before rushing to solve the originally stated problem, a better result for everyone was able to be found. For the customer this include a substantial overall cost reduction, a much faster supply chain and a new more collaborative approach to material design and selection. For the supplier the improved collaboration meant increased sales volumes and a major improvement in the way they could communicate with their customer, even when problems arose.

Although the outcome was a successful one in terms of process, the improvement in relationship between the two businesses, as well as the shared celebration of solving problems together proved to be the greater benefit to all.

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