

Road Map to Citywide Quality

by Amy Larsen, Terry Myers, and Jeff Pomeranz

Here is one of those million-dollar questions: How do you bring employees closer to the core processes of a local government as the organization itself expands?

HERE'S THE THOUGHT-OUT ANSWER

The community of West Des Moines, Iowa, has grown from an 1890s railroad town known as Valley Junction, with a population of 500, to today's hub of commerce and premier living. Located at the crossroads of Interstates 35 and 80, West Des Moines is the fastest-growing community in Iowa. Since 1990, the population has grown from 31,702 to 54,696, and the city has expanded from 21 to 38.5 square miles.

Today, West Des Moines boasts two regional malls, expansive office parks, numerous restaurants and retail establishments, residential development, and parklands. Quality growth and higher expectations—from elected officials, residents, and business owners—come hand in hand in West Des Moines. Although rapid growth has proven both manageable and successful, the higher service levels it necessitates have inspired renewed creativity and a commitment to examine what the city does and how it can be done better.

An aggressive improvement initiative began in 2000 in order to address concerns about improving service, meeting customer requirements, developing a process to make work more efficient and effective, and receiving input from employees in the decision-making process.

This latter goal superseded the rest, as management believed investing employees in all city processes would naturally evolve into improved workflows and customer service. The city looked to some of the processes and approaches of the private sector and chose quality management as the tool for improving city processes.

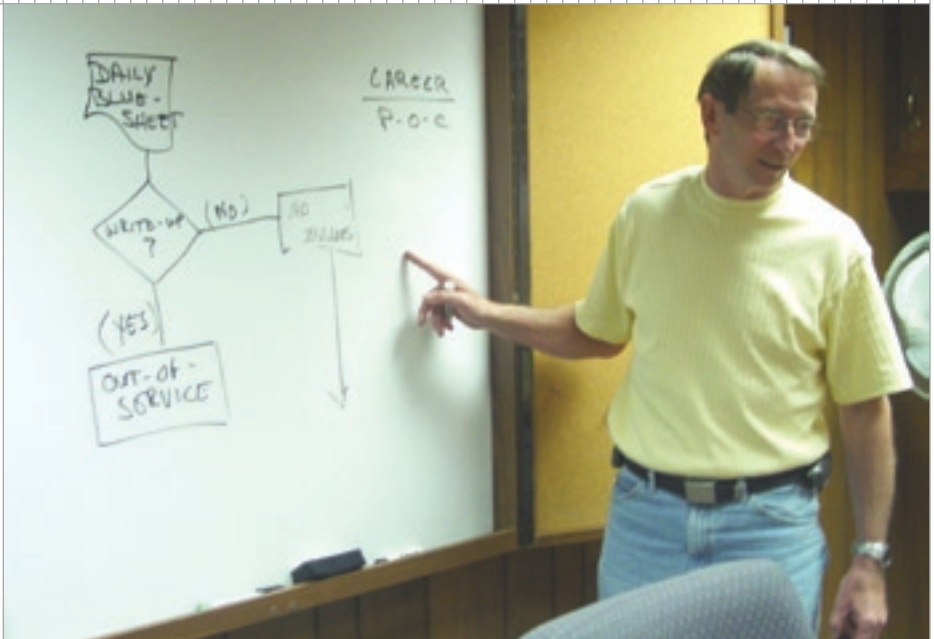
Among other things, West Des Moines's foray into quality management has both improved service levels and heightened employee involvement and investment in the city. This cost-containing strategy focuses on maintaining and improving the city's core processes while systematically evaluating and eliminating any waste incurred in carrying out those processes, including the curse of the re's—reworking, redoing, respecifying, reorganizing, and rescheduling.

There are a number of approaches to process improvement, including Total Quality Management, Lean Strategies, and Six Sigma, and whether or not quality management was the perfect choice for West Des Moines was not as important as picking a strategy and sticking with it. The ability to learn, practice, and refine a quality management system that city employees take ownership over has proven more important than anything. Though there have been bumps along the way, the city has not considered changing course for the sake of the latest buzzwords.

STRUCTURE

The quality initiative is self-governed by the citywide quality team (CWQT), which consists of two members from each city department, including all department heads. This is an opportunity for the city manager's office and senior and support staff to meet monthly to examine areas for improvement in processes and systems across organizational boundaries.

Its approximately 30 members include professional, clerical, union, and nonunion employees, all of whom have an equal vote when it comes to approving policies that in-



Ed Schmanke, manager of fleet services, West Des Moines, Iowa, clarifies a point during a routine process action team discussion of “should be process” steps.

volve the quality initiative, creating teams to address processes, and implementing recommendations. Each department also has a smaller version of this group, a quality team that addresses process improvement within their area.

Implementing the quality initiative wasn't without problems and resistance at all levels.

THE PATS

Process actions teams (PATs) are formed by the CWQT to research and recommend solutions to processes. A PAT is made up of a small group of employees who are stakeholders in the process being evaluated. There are six roles on any PAT:

- Champion
- Members-stakeholders
- Facilitator
- Leader
- Recorder
- Timekeeper

Serving on a PAT is not voluntary, and all members are trained in problem identification and data collection methods. If issues do not cross organizational boundaries, they are designated for the appropriate department's quality team.

The recorder and timekeeper roles are self-explanatory, but some roles require elaboration. Each PAT has a champion whose main role is to oversee and support the team's activities. The champion acts as a resource. The champion communicates—and sometimes mediates—between the PAT and the CWQT, always remaining neutral in the process but asking open-ended questions meant to stimulate discussion or refocus the group.

One PAT member-stakeholder serves as leader for the PAT. The leader maintains focus, encourages participation, and works toward achieving a positive team dynamic. The leader also coordinates and facilitates PAT meetings.

Over time, education and training for facilitators were introduced. Quality facilitators, usually assigned in pairs, are ad hoc members of the PAT. They provide initial training for the PAT and introduce the tools necessary to accomplish its mission.



Four team members, from left to right, Chris Ishmael (fleet services), Bruce Arnold (firefighter), Sue Brandt (fleet services), and Ryan Hall (firefighter) are debating the pros and cons of process alternatives.

Training of quality team and PAT members focuses heavily on a basic problem-solving process (see process on page 30). It provides a common language across all departments and levels the playing field for participants on citywide process action teams. Everyone involved works with the same understanding and vocabulary. Facilitators assist the leader and the champion in identifying and removing obstacles. New facilitators are now trained each year alongside experienced veterans.

Facilitators also meet monthly in a support group. They discuss techniques and update each other on current PATs as well as work together to answer questions. Creating this internal training mechanism has built internal commitment and fostered ownership from within the city.

CHALLENGES

Implementing the quality initiative wasn't without problems and resistance at all levels. One of the first PATs to tackle a complex and vital process—a review of development projects in the city—spent more than two years developing suggested improvements. Experiences like this,

and the newness of the quality concept, made employee acceptance more difficult.

In 2005, the city decided to retool. After trying to go it alone for a year with the structure created, it elected

Recent efforts streamlined training, encouraged selecting processes that could be evaluated and addressed in shorter periods of time, and allowed a faster track or a less formal method, or both, for those with prior quality experience.

to acquire some guidance from a regional source. Three Dimensional LLC suggested changes to help simplify and encourage flexibility. One of the

fundamental rules established at the outset was that the company could not change the basic vocabulary and terminology that people already were using within the city's quality initiative.

The strengths and weaknesses of the West Des Moines process were evaluated without altering its core. Rather than jump in and give the appearance of dramatically changing things, the city was encouraged to make some significant changes to the quality initiative during a 12- to 18-month period. As a result, here are some observations:

- The city needed to eliminate the notion of voluntary participation on PATs. Some key participants were taking a wait-and-see attitude to quality. The CWQT created a policy that made participation in the quality initiative an expected part of everyone's job.
- PAT members were struggling to achieve perfection as they completed each of the required problem-solving steps. They tended to spend an inordinate amount of time working with inputs more than outputs, worrying more about the execution of quality tools (for example, diagrams and flow charts) than about getting to the root of a problem and suggesting ways to fix it. They were refocused and encouraged to be more flexible in applying the problem-solving process.
- The initial process required teams to prepare a recommendations report outlining action steps for managers to implement. However, there was no feedback mechanism. If managers delayed implementation of any recommendations, PAT members concluded that their time was wasted. Now, PAT members coordinate with the affected managers and take an active role in testing and implementing the action plan.
- A significant challenge in any organization is an unclear role for managers (department heads) in the PAT process. Many organizations engage their managers only to have



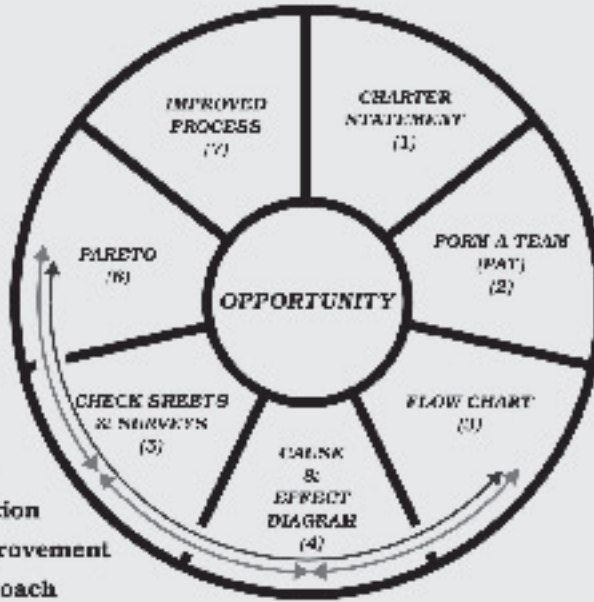
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Basic Problem-Solving Process



Imperatives:

- * Team Approach
- * Process Orientation
- * Continuous Improvement
- * Structured Approach

them dominate discussions and make judgments after a team of employees defers to their authority. Through a process of role plays, West Des

Moines CWQT members have learned how to break down barriers and ask, "What can I do to help?" In short, recent efforts streamlined

training, encouraged selecting processes that could be evaluated and addressed in shorter periods of time, and allowed a faster track or a less formal method, or both, for those with prior quality experience. Employees are eager to use the simplified approach and satisfied as they see a faster correlation between their work and real change effected in the organization. Increased familiarity with both the purpose and techniques of quality management eventually resulted in a smoother process ingrained in everyday work.

Many of the tools and techniques employees have learned from the quality initiative, including flow charting, data gathering, brainstorming, cause-and-effect thinking, and problem definition, are now being used in day-to-day management.

IMPROVED PROCESSES

West Des Moines has set up more than 20 citywide PATs and nearly 40 departmental PATs. Improved processes



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have occurred in the areas of development review, budgets, and workers' compensation, among others.

Development review. The development review team formulated 33 recommendations to improve the development review process, which has been the most complex process reviewed in the quality initiative. Highlights include a revised review process, a case adviser acting as single point of contact, a new development review team, and pre-submittal meetings. Eventually, the city was reorganized to accommodate a development services department.

A pre-submittal survey of applicants shows the following satisfaction levels with pre-submittal meetings created by this PAT:

- 100 percent strongly agree or agree that the meeting is informative and helpful.
- 97 percent strongly agree or agree that city staff demonstrate technical competence.
- 96 percent strongly agree or agree that the city staff are courteous and professional.
- 88 percent strongly agree or agree that the city staff are responsive and easy to contact.
- 92 percent strongly agree or agree that the overall meeting is beneficial.

In addition to applicant satisfaction with this newer approach to development review, cycle times for applications and approval have improved.

Budget process. This PAT evaluated the citywide operating budget process to streamline and eliminate unnecessary paperwork while still providing adequate information and documentation to continue to meet all internal requirements, state requirements, and award criteria for the Government Finance Officers Association.

The packet containing the operating budget forms and instructions was reduced from 25 pages to 14 pages although it still provided enough information for internal and external requirements. After the budget process was completed, a survey of users showed:

- 100 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the budget forms were easier to use, that the forms took less time to complete, and that information requested was relevant to the budget submission.
- 89 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the paperwork for submitting budget requests was reduced. They reported that they spent from 10 to 75 percent less time completing budget submissions using the new forms.

Workers' compensation: The work of this PAT resulted in a brochure to employees that better explains the workers' compensation process and the legal rights of employees. This team has improved the quality of the medical provider, and it continues to monitor quality through regularly scheduled surveys of users. An annual questionnaire tracks results. In the 2006 questionnaire (which had a 71 percent response rate),

- 92.4 percent rated the quality of medical care average or above (Lickert Scale).
- 100 percent of respondents felt their manager was responsive to their care.
- 95 percent felt their manager accommodated work restrictions.
- 100 percent felt that their manager

knew what to do when they were injured.

Departmental PATs have also tackled issues, among many others, such as electronic document flow, employee safety, emergency evacuation, stormwater intake, park development review, and library appearance.

The most important elements of the West Des Moines quality initiative have been focus and execution—dedicated employees take care of the rest. The city is drilling the essence of process improvement systematically and systemically into its culture, with the goal that, with tweaks and twinges, it will survive for years to come.

FUTURE STEPS

In the near future, the focus will be on establishing accountability for core process ownership, breaking down the search for perfect solutions, and effectively measuring process performance. The city continues to integrate its strategies and process performance by knitting the quality initiative with the balanced scorecard. **PM**

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PM Look to ICMA

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