If you live in California (or neighboring states, or Texas) you will have heard about In-n-Out Burger, one of the nation's premier fast-food restaurant chains. The family-owned chain has been around since 1946, and still does things "the old fashioned way"—which includes a relentless focus on food quality and customer service. We visited a local In-n-Out restaurant recently and we were struck by the quality of communication the team exhibited.

It should be obvious that a fast-food restaurant is staffed by a team of individuals, each with a primary assignment. At In-n-Out, some people make the fries and other people grill the patties and still other people take the patties and turn them into custom-ordered hamburgers. (For example, my favorite order is a Double-Single, animal style, extra pickles. That order makes sense at In-n-Out, and nobody pauses for even half a second when I make it.) The bottom-line is that this group of individuals has to work together *as a team* so as to receive, make, and deliver customer orders. They must do so as quickly and as efficiently as possible (since no order is started before it's ordered), knowing that each order is going to be a one-off package uniquely tailored to the customer's specifications. In other words, there is very little standard work at In-n-Out. There are standard processes, but almost no standard work. Thus, the team not only has to work together as one, but it must be flexible and adapt quickly to what the customers are ordering at the time.

The team accomplishes this through communication.

Years ago we worked on teams that used a tailored CMMI maturity model to evaluate the program management function at various aerospace and defense companies. At that time, we didn't specifically focus on evaluating internal and external communications but, if we had, we probably would have set up a maturity model along the following lines:

1 – Rigid silos in evidence. Little or no internal communication between silos. Customer communications restricted to specific silos (e.g., Contracts) with little or no dissemination outside designated silos. Internal and external lines of communication have gaps and/or are misaligned. No escalation of risks and issues outside of silos.

2 – Rigid silos in evidence. Ad hoc / informal communication between silos. Customer communications officially restricted to specific silos with informal dissemination outside silos. Internal and external lines of communication have no gaps but may be misaligned in some

instances. Escalation of risks and issues outside silos reactive and not timely.

3 – Silos in evidence but formal and informal communication between silos noted. Some use of Integrated Process Teams (IPTs) but IPTs are not the norm and may not be aligned when they exist. Customer communication disseminated through program team and matrix functions through documented protocols. Internal and external lines of communication are aligned, and have no gaps. Escalation of risks and issues formalized but posture is still reactive.

4 – IPTs abundant, managed, and aligned to bridge silos. Customer communication quickly disseminated to all stakeholders. Internal and external lines of communication are robust, linked to document management functions, aligned, and have no gaps. Risk and issues managed, escalated timely to minimize reactivity.

5 – Culture of communication and information management. Formal and informal communications abundant, designed to efficiently disseminate information, including risks and issues, to all stakeholders. Document management and retention linked to communication. All internal and external lines of communication operating well.

Our experience at In-n-Out would have pegged that restaurant as operating somewhere between a 3 and a 4 on the scale described above. The shift lead was communicating constantly with her team, telling people where to go and what to do. She clearly communicated her expectations, both for individuals and for the team as a whole. (For example, she said "I expect at least one positive customer comment to the feedback line for this shift. What are you going to do to make that happen?") In a moment of quiet she went over and explained to a new person running the register how to properly input the special orders so that the rest of the team would understand what they had to do. People spoke to each other and the food was prepared and delivered quickly.

There was one time at a swanky restaurant in Las Vegas when I saw a team operating at a level beyond rating. The kitchen was open and the patrons sat around watching food being prepared. And not a word was exchanged between the individuals in the kitchen. They were silent. They were silent because they all knew what needed to be done and were proficient at doing it. They were demonstrating "unconscious competence" and the patrons were paying for it. (It was worth it.)

Communication

Written by Nick Sanders
Monday, 17 July 2017 00:00 -

How would you rank your operating culture in terms of communication?

In our experience government contractors don't have really great communication. Which is a problem for the compliance function, because communication facilitates compliance.

Questions to consider when ranking your operating culture:

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Does the proposal team know the terms and conditions that affect the cost estimate? For example, are there Section H terms that impact per diem reimbursement? If personnel are operating OCONUS, does the team understand the tax implications?

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How accurate is the contract brief? What's the lag time between receipt of a contract mod and the updating of the contract brief? Is the contract brief disseminated to everybody who needs to know contract information, including the billing function?

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What indirect rates are used to prepare program EACs? Are they the most current and accurate rates or are they last year's FPRA rates?

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What is the time lag between submission of final billing rates and the submission of "period 13" adjustment vouchers?

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In a T&M contract environment, how often are hourly labor billing rates reviewed to make sure all personnel are in the correct rate categories?

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Communication

Written by Nick Sanders
Monday, 17 July 2017 00:00 -

When   senior leadership makes a strategic decision, how long does it take   for that decision to be disseminated to the rest of the   organization?

We could go on.

The point of this article is that *communication matters*. It may be the single most important indication of the ability of an organization to execute efficiently and effectively.

In-n-Out Burger may have figured out how to communicate and how to use communication to facilitate superior execution.

How are you doing?