

# Building a Great Organization from Within

Use your employees to find and fix problems.

By Chet Holmes

Times are tough. The economy is in a constant state of upheaval. Is your organization doing better than most?

If not, it's time for some serious soul searching. You can benefit from finding out what it means to be a great organization. And the answer lies within. All you need to do is tap into the incredible treasure trove of knowledge your employees hold. Then harness their energies and channel their efforts to help your organization become great.

Just think, you may have invested thousands in automated systems. Have you any real idea how they're being used? Your staff may be doing a good job, but are the procedures and processes they use based on intuition, experience, and organizational memory? Can these systems be readily duplicated or transferred in the event of accidents, sickness, or major changes in personnel?

You have to find out how your organization is really doing. How do you do that? Ask your employees.

## Hold a Strategy Session

To identify changes needed to make your organization great, hold a strategy session (also called a process improvement meeting). Have a neutral facilitator run the session and ask employees these questions:

- How is the organization doing?
- Is the top management strategy on track?
- What is the organization doing right?
- What needs fixing?
- What specific items stand in the way of becoming a better organization?

Just one process improvement meeting can give you six months of things to fix in your organization.

### Case in Point: Too Many Exceptions to the Rule

In one organization, an item that came up in the



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strategy session was, "There are too many exceptions to the rule." The facilitator asked for specific examples. In an hour's time, employees listed 19 situations where this organization had never created procedures, policies, or standards by which people operate. It turned out that few people had a concrete idea of how things were done across the organization.

Next, employees focused on the question, "What can we do to fix this problem?" They used a whiteboard to capture all the brainstormed ideas. Then they culled the list till they came up with two strategies for each problem. Using consensus, they went for the solutions that could reduce the most pain first.

The employees worked with management and implemented the corrective actions. All 19 problems were fixed within two weeks.

Some of the solutions involved simple form letters.

Some involved creating sections on the organization's Web site to answer questions. Other solutions required setting boundaries within which people could operate, even creating a tiered approach to what they could do. (In other words: Try this; if that doesn't work, do this; if that doesn't work, try this.) Virtually all areas where employees once had to go to a supervisor were fixed, creating a standard operating procedure for people to follow.

The results were astonishing. The entire organization runs better now. In two weeks, they solved problems the organization had had for a decade. Doing so lightened the load for everyone. One major benefit was that top management was free to work on other things.

### Case in Point: Finding Prospects

In another organization's strategy session, employees decided they needed to tune up their communication process with prospective donors. They looked at how prospects interacted with the organization, identified all possible interfaces, and zeroed in on the first

point of contact. Whenever a prospect touched the organization via the Web, e-mail, phone call, letter, or personal interaction, they asked these simple questions:

- What would make this interaction more potent?
- How can we establish quick rapport?
- How can we build even more rapport?
- How much do we learn about the prospect?
- How do we create desire?
- What is the follow up?
- What else can we offer?
- How can we create a long-term relationship?

Over a five-month period, employees examined and improved every aspect of their communication process with prospective donors. They reinvented the entire process.

Before the process improvement

sessions, the organization was getting one new donor for every 100 Internet leads. After the sessions, that changed to six new donors out of 50 leads. One year after the process improvement effort, the Internet had become the organization's primary source of prospects.

### Work on the Organization

You've heard the dictum, "Work on the organization, not just in the organization." To do so, you need to ask people three questions:

- Where's the pain?
- What needs to be fixed?
- How can we fix it?

Ask these questions and your employees will tell you. But you must be willing to respond in a supportive, nonjudgmental way. Employees will remain loyal and enthused only if the CEO and management demonstrate respect, integrity, honesty, and forthrightness through the process.

When you hold process improvement sessions, it's KMS (Keep

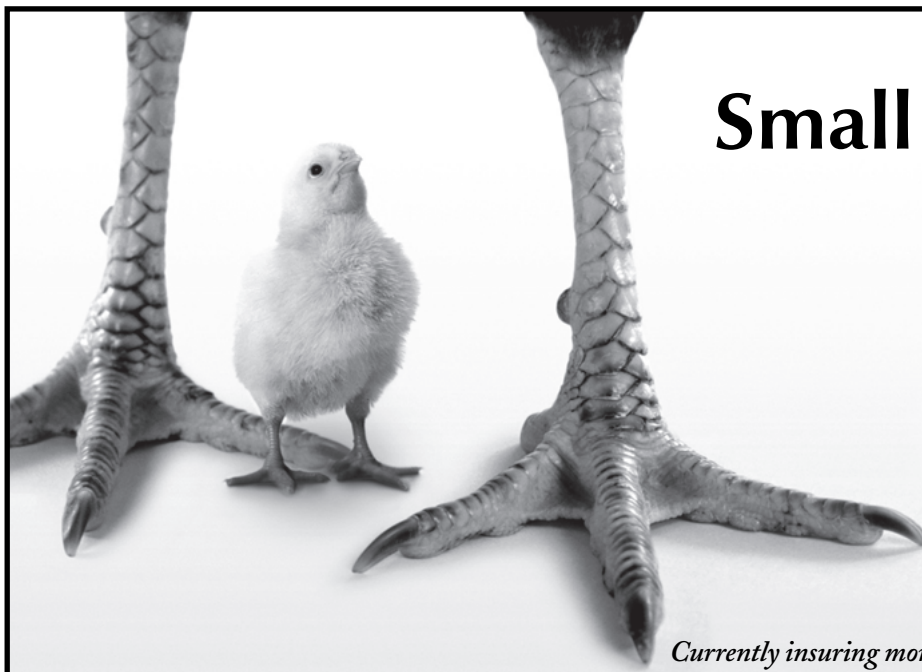
Mouth Shut) time. You must stop talking and listen carefully. You have to let the data tell you what's happening.

It's pretty hard for most organizations to manage process improvement without professional help. Having a trained improvement specialist will help ensure that no one's made to feel stupid or intimidated by what is said.

If you have a good staff, the only thing you need to bring to the meeting is your willingness to see things through their eyes. Your people will fill you with valuable information and ideas on how to fix problems you didn't even know existed and lead you to unimagined success, if only you let them. ■

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Nonprofit World • Volume 24, Number 5 September/October 2006  
Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations  
5820 Canton Center Road, Suite 165, Canton, Michigan 48187  
734-451-3582 • www.snpo.org



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