

The Customer is in the House

By Carl Deeley, Director, US Consulting

Some questions have deceptively simple answers. Ask a room full of engineers who their customers are and you're likely to get a quick answer – even, possibly, a name. Most of us could answer the question fast, even without thinking. But if we slow down and rethink the simple answer, we can actually devise new and powerful uses for some fairly common tools.

Anyone who has used the House of Quality, for instance, knows it as a tool for organizing and analyzing the voice of the customer. But if we rethink both the identity of the customer and the tool itself, we find the House of Quality can have an important role in redesigning internal processes.

Let's say your team has some important decisions to make about where, when and how to focus your improvement efforts. Looking through your business office or plant, you see 10 areas in need of simultaneous transformation. On the other hand, you agree that you do not have the resources to pull this off. This means you have to deselect projects.

Deselection – deciding what not to do – is one of the most difficult things a manager does, especially in a team environment. Everyone has a pet project and believes that their vision of how the work should progress is the most logical. In this atmosphere, egos can get quickly tangled in decision-making. What we need to do first is strip emotion out of the discussion, and then consider each position qualitatively.

In this situation, who is the customer? The bottom line.

It may even help to give the bottom line a personality. (A bit voracious, perhaps; or a straight-talk-er with the curiosity and patience of a hound dog.)

bottom line

A kaizen team worked through a very similar issue recently and discovered that project deselection using the House of Quality can be a relatively pain-free method for reaching consensus, once we all took a singular viewpoint.

As a group, we identified the factors most important to Mr. Bottom Line: increased sales and reduced costs. Then we went through each of the product lines and asked what its contribution was to the ultimate goal. This was detailed work, in which we noted costs, service, fill rate, lead time, quality issues and cost of quality.

Perhaps the cost of quality on a particular line was \$3 a unit. This same line, we agreed, was capable of increasing sales by 20 percent – making it a worthwhile target. As a group, we decided on numerical values for each of the product lines, based on cost and sales potential. After that, it was a fairly simple matter to see which areas would be most beneficial to Mr. Bottom Line.

This exercise can, of course, be accomplished simply with notes on a blackboard. The House of Quality, however, brings definite structure to the team's investigation. As a team works through the rooms of the "house," everyone is forced to discuss the facts of any situation, evaluate the facts qualitatively, compare the facts of one situation to another, and only then come to decision.

Too often, business people are rushing ahead, using intuition and common beliefs to guide us in our decision-making. And, being generally nice people, we all hate to say no. So, we end up with too many projects on our plates, making decisions on the fly as we rush off to the next agenda item. Commitment to a decision is much greater when everyone understands the reasons behind it.

Stop. Take a moment with a team to look at your situation clearly. You might be surprised at the strides you will make – this time in the right direction. ■

