

A process improvement project (process design and implementation) delivers performance improvement and positions a business fit-for-the-future!

Curtis Contract Interiors were established over 10 years ago by Jason Walker and Neil Wood. The company specialises in commercial interior refurbishment. Bergander and Curtis first became acquainted in the course of a Process Audit. The Bergander Process Audit (a short, sharp and rigorous look at a business at work) identified a number of important areas for business improvement. The company had also recently engaged in the development of a strategy for future growth and the output from the two activities converged to make a case for change that could not be ignored by the Curtis management team.

For one day a week over several months the management team at Curtis worked with Bergander to examine and improve the company's processes. The programme began with a detailed mapping exercise that involved fully-understanding the current position which, in turn, highlighted specific processes that were key to the success of both a project and the company as a whole.

Identifying current action around managing enquiries, estimating, production and installation, through to client sign-off were critical steps prior to determining and implementing change. Like many businesses, Curtis had evolved its operations into a set of informal protocols that got the job done rather than a set of well thought-out processes that did it in the best possible way. There was, as expected, some initial resistance to the programme and the need for change had to challenge a small 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' uprising. It is often your best staff who will initially resist change for it is their commitment to, and ownership of the status-quo that has so often ensured success in the past.

Gathered together in the workshop, surrounded by machines and work-in-progress a presentation was made to all staff explaining the objectives of the programme and the timescales. Managing expectations and communicating regularly and openly with staff outside the project team is a key success factor in any change programme. The Curtis project team and Bergander jointly made a number of presentations to staff in the course of the programme.

After the project launch the team began the detailed work of designing a new 'dream' process. Every week a few more steps of the process were added by the team, every step being well thought-out and clearly described. This is where good teamwork is essential for it is, at this stage in the project, that differences in opinion need to be debated constructively to arrive at the very best solution. It's for this reason that a team working exercise was completed on the first day of the programme, nothing overbearing, but an exercise that demonstrates very effectively the value of each person's contribution. The lively debates at Curtis produced the required output of a defined sequence of steps to achieve the end goal, otherwise known as a 'process'.

The process that was designed was very deliberately unconstrained and utopian in nature. The idea is to design the very best process for the business without any limitations, and then, only once the ideal process has been designed, to agree where it should be constrained. Designing a new process to a combination of different perceived limitations or constraints will never produce the best result and so this approach is used wherever possible.

At Curtis many new ideas were introduced: improved integration and use of IT across the business; new management information; streamlined and improved paperwork; improved empowerment; quality assurance practices; capacity planning and scheduling; job tracking; increased customer interaction; new responsibilities and above else a clearly defined and well-understood route through the critical steps of order processing, design, manufacture and dispatch and/or fit.

The team was delighted with the end-result of their efforts and a completed process flow diagram for their business was displayed for all to see. Designing the new process however is only the half-way stage and

the next step was to implement and then embed the new process into the business.

There is a famous change management maxim (the 'Lerwin model') that describes a process of successful change as unfreezing the status-quo, implementing new ways of working and then refreezing. The status-quo at Curtis had to be defrosted and the new process then introduced before the changes could be considered to have been successfully introduced.

The unfreezing operation had already begun with the prior briefings to all staff but now additional briefings were conducted to introduce the changes. New ways of working are always best introduced via newly defined roles and responsibilities and at Curtis the new job functions were explained to everyone. Now for the refreezing operation and this is where things do not always set in the way you'd like them to. Neil and Jason, both pragmatists, took the view that the new process and methods of working would be installed and then refined and embedded over time as the business adjusted to its new conditions. Different managers might approach this in different ways and in a manner that befits the prevailing organizational culture. At Curtis the internal business and the external environment were changing fast and so Neil and Jason opted for an appropriate approach.

Crucial to any new process and the upkeep and maintenance of its effectiveness in supporting the business as it develops is management information. Curtis now monitor a number of key parameters for every project. Parameters that ensure and stimulate further the improvement of excellent customer service, a top quality product and on top of that a profitable business to support future investment.

"We can now quickly identify and address any issues on projects at appropriate stages and act upon them before they become costly problems", says Jason Walker, adding, "this is what we needed to support our growth plans and to really develop our business".

Curtis, with its dedicated craftsmen, a design and estimating department along with its project management and marketing teams is now poised to make a real impact in the market place. As of their project they now have the processes, the product and the people.

If you would like to discuss a process improvement programme that will deliver lasting benefits to your business and support business growth and business success give us a call. These programmes provide a significant and rapid return on investment.

"Bergander have been excellent for our business. Hard working and committed to our goals, I would recommend their services to anyone" – Neil Wood, Director, Curtis Contract Interiors Ltd.

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