Building and Maintaining Effective Business Relationships

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The phrase "What we've got here is (a) failure to communicate" is a famous line we've all quoted at one time or another from the 1967 film Cool Hand Luke. Similar to the film, it's not that communications are not taking place between IT and the business; it's just that they're ineffective or unproductive. Let's face it, sometimes we're literally thrown into an IT/business relationship with no history, faced to come up with a quick solution and expected to deliver results that show value to our customers.

One proven method used to assist with this issue is that of the liaison position between IT and the business. Within this article we will address the why and how this position can help restore relationships between IT and the business, tear down the silos between internal IT departments and influence business-to-business relationships by leveraging common technologies.

The Liaison

While having a committed liaison serving as a full time communications specialist is obviously a preferred method, the liaison function does not have to be a dedicated position within IT. It can be incorporated into existing positions, such as the Systems Analysts or Project Managers with a goal to migrate and adopt the basic principles of the liaison role into all facets of IT. Whether choosing a full time or responsibility-based liaison role the right candidates must be chosen to be successful with this effort.

The person fulfilling the requirements of the liaison should possess a history of strong customer satisfaction, preferably someone who's held cross-functional responsibilities within IT and who possesses a willingness to learn about business planning, business processes and service delivery. If you are looking internally to fulfill this role, it is a perfect opportunity to provide to those aspiring managers or IT leaders within your organization.

Restoring Relationships

Restoring those broken or turbulent relationships between IT and the business is the first and by far the most important role of the liaison. While in this role, I began the process of restoration by having multiple standing weekly meetings scheduled with my customer base. My immediate position was to show our customers that IT was flexible and capable of being there whenever they needed us to be. I received buy-in from IT management that my customer meetings out ranked my IT meetings and that they took precedence. Just as important we made sure, through my management, that the customer understood this as well.

Once you've established that you are committed to their time line, the next crucial step is to understand their immediate and future needs. What this translates to, in the short term, is that you are going to gather a laundry list of complaints and wishes. This list should start with management and trickle down into the business personnel. You want to make sure the entire department feels represented. The goal is to fix their complaints as quickly as possible and to schedule, with them, a timeline to handle their wishes. This can sound a bit overwhelming, but you'd be surprised how much you can accomplish rapidly with the right resources and management support.

For example, one of my customers was the pharmaceutical department for a large hospital and their complaints and wish list was quite extensive. I should note here that the validity of their complaints was not debated. *At this point we were not there to justify or defend, only to move the relationship forward.* The process was started by getting an introduction and hand-off from my director to the VP of Pharmacy. The next step was to build a strategy for handling the complaints with the VP's input. With my IT management's approval, I basically built my own support team and went to work. The support

team consisted of a dedicated help desk analyst to ensure all issues were tracked through the help desk system and dedicated technicians to assist me with all the technical requirements. My main job was working with the pharmacy staff as we worked on each issue and hand-held them through the support process. We wanted them to trust in the process, that if they called for support the problem would get fixed.

This was not an easy task. As we'll discuss later in this article, we discovered our support process had some significant holes that we needed to address. However, within one week we had managed to fix all the outstanding issues and complaints and more importantly make our customer extremely happy. What it also accomplished was to instill the importance of our process with the 1st and 2nd tier IT support groups. On occasion, I'd invite the help desk agent and a desktop technician to meet with me and the VP to discuss specific issues. It was amazing to see what 10-15 minutes of time could accomplish. Our staff gained a sense of ownership and you could imagine how important the VP felt having that many IT members show up to handle his department's issues.

Tearing Down the Silos

It was previously mentioned that we discovered some holes in our support process that were affecting our ability to deliver superior service to our customer. The hard part was that the process was looking only at the efficiency of our IT environment and not the impact to the customers. Much of this was derived from each IT group creating a process that allowed them to be streamlined individually, but not across the entire support process. The IT environment was fairly complex, consisting of a local systems group, a local infrastructure group and a shared services group. On top of this, both the local infrastructure and shared services groups were partially outsourced. Can we say silos? There were many and they were the main source of our service issues. The real issue is that no one within their own world view truly saw the need of the customer. So we set forth to fix this issue jointly with the VP of Pharmacy.

The article "From Silos to a Shared Vision" it discusses the power of a shared vision. I can't stress enough how important and true that is. We shared the vision by pulling all the key players from each group together and getting them face time with both the VP of Pharmacy and the IT Director. The secret sauce in this situation was that both the VP of Pharmacy and IT Director took ownership of this communication issue and made themselves available to see it fixed. Cutting through the chase, we changed the process to be less departmentalized and made it all about our customer. It became a true service level management process that ensured our customers would receive the value from IT that they expected. This obviously led to some pretty critical changes in how IT was structured, but it was no longer just IT trying to figure it out on their own; it was driven from a true business value perspective, creating streamlined support processes and tearing the silos that existed between the various IT groups.

Influencing the Business

Gaining success with the Pharmacy department encouraged IT to duplicate this across all of the business units. We also incorporated the liaison role into some of our existing project manager and systems analyst positions. As one of the project managers, I had several business units that were my primary area of focus, one of which was the Infectious Disease Control Center (IDCC). Although the IDCC was a necessary department in terms of compliance and interfaced between several of the larger hospital departments, they within themselves were not a capitol raising entity. This made it challenging when trying to introduce new technology solutions to better improve and expedite their business processes.

Working together with the Director of IDCC along with key IT personnel, we designed a solution that was going to significantly improve not only the identification and escalation of an infectious disease within the hospital environment, but it would also accelerate the process of disease control and containment. Even after pursuing and gaining several grants and long term loans, there was still not enough funding to achieve what was necessary for the solution. During one of our meetings, we discovered that a key component for the solution was directly related to the TPN area of Pharmacy. TPN is the intravenous feeding function and already had an automated solution in place that our project would interface with. Jointly the IDCC Director and I presented the project to the VP of Pharmacy and revealed to him on the benefits to not only his department but the marketing value for the entire hospital. He was able to go get the remainder of the funds needed. You can imagine the win-win with this. Now mind you, IT could have simply made the introduction between the two business units and stepped away, but because of the relationships we had managed to build between the both of them they allowed us to be the primary PM for not only the technical aspects but for the entire project.

Summary

"What we've got here is (a) failure to communicate"; let's not allow that cycle to continue within the world that we call IT.

Remember communication starts with you actually reaching out and showing your customers that you care enough to try something different. Our victories discussed in this article did not come with presenting some new application or superior technical solution, nor were they accomplished with a process improvement project; it came by way of proving to our customers that we are in business with them. In return, they showed us they valued us as a trusted business partner and we gained a voice and a closer seat at the business planning table. Whether as a full time or integrated role, the power of the liaison position can be an outstanding way to build and maintain those effective business relationships.