What is your ONE thing?
Utilizing the Critical Symptom Approach to Build and Execute a Better Plan

Thought Leadership Report

In today's increasingly competitive and resource-constrained environment, many organizations struggle to spend the necessary time and assets required to improve the long-term performance of their organization. The immediate needs of upholding day-to-day performance consume time and attention prohibiting a proactive culture in supporting long-term performance improvement. This reality of fighting fires and working around the established processes in order to get things done, now introduces endless amounts of variation to the established and proven ways of conducting business.

Over time, these behaviors become deeply ingrained in an organization's culture with "winning the day" being the focus and "doing what it takes" being recognized as a desirable trait. This condition presents a risk to the business, by entering into a downward spiral that threatens its future due to the inability to work effectively and efficiently on strategic improvement. The organization's leaders are faced with the challenge of so much that needs to be done with so little time and so few resources to do it.

Many organizations are making a conscious effort to overcome this dynamic and focus their attention on what is most important, by utilizing various methods of aligning strategies to a deployment plan and executing that plan. Regardless of the specific method used, it is the execution portion of the process that organizations struggle with the most. Without effective execution of the plan, the strategies go unfulfilled and the investment of resources ultimately provides little or no return.

MainStream GS has found that the ability to execute is largely dependent upon the quality and clarity of the plan. A more concise and comprehensive plan means better utilization of resources, more effective solutions and longer lasting results. The urgency of the call for action and the predisposition of the culture to "just get stuff done" preclude the necessary discipline to develop a better plan.

The most frequently overlooked and undervalued step in the Plan, Do, Check and Act model is the Planning step. MainStream GS has developed a deployment planning discipline called the "critical symptom" approach that assists the supporting levels of the organization prioritize a seemingly endless list of "should dos" in order to focus in on the

IT'S NOT ONLY ONE THING. IT'S ONE THING AT A TIME.
– Gary Keller

"must dos". The result of the critical symptom approach is a singular improvement focus within a business unit or value stream. The singular improvement focus is identified through disciplined elements of discovery and critical thinking that result in a comprehensive understanding of cause and effect.

The singular focus that results from the critical symptom approach provides a level of simplicity and built-in alignment of efforts by leveraging the doers' passion and energy, and focusing them toward a single result. A coordinated and thorough diagnosis of systemic causes, an orchestrated rollout of prioritized projects for the methodical development of solutions and the controlled implementation of those solutions increases the rate and effectiveness of solution implementation and ultimately the overall benefit to the business.

The critical symptom approach may be counter intuitive for organizations whose performance improvement practices are based upon attacking their business weaknesses and threats on multiple fronts simultaneously. The critical symptom approach combines elements of systems, Lean and critical thinking and is fueled by robust root cause analysis. The approach's incorporation of key performance and operational metrics allows organizations to have a plan that targets root causes and immediately highlights the impact of the improvement work that will take place as the plan moves through execution. There are five critical guidelines in utilizing the critical symptoms approach to improve the quality and clarity of your plan:

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- Wait to divide and conquer
- Understand how your system works
- Understand the relationships between your performance symptoms
- Determine the critical symptom
- Do not act until you fully understand cause and know the root causes

Wait to Divide and Conquer

The call for action generates a predisposition to get things done. Those who buy-in, act quickly and claim results are lauded as the types of individuals it takes to secure the organization's future. While this is a good thing in and of itself, there are risks associated to this culture that must be overcome. Risks associated with this type of culture include:

1. Too great of a competition mentality between the doers
2. A deficit of understanding of cause
3. The inability to complete many of the projects because resources are stretched too thin

To the extent the projects are completed, they often result in conflicting solutions, unintended consequences, and short lived or suboptimal results.

Understand How the System Works

The concept of value stream (i.e. a system) is based on the belief that the best way to improve operational performance is to improve the flow of value through all of the necessary actions required to deliver the desired outcomes (value) to customers. In addition to the traditional shop floor, it is necessary to include the marketing, sales, order generation and a litany of other supporting and contributing processes within the full value stream in order to have the most impact to the performance of that value stream.

When it comes to improving the performance of the value stream, it is all too frequent that once problem areas are identified, the solutions are pursued without having analyzed the value stream as a system. Analyzing the value stream as a system rather than unique individual processes is critical, as each subsequent process in that system is reliant at least in part on the previous processes and their respective outputs. The critical symptom approach calls for a comprehensive understanding of how the value stream operates as a set of processes,

and seeks to understand the interdependencies between those processes relative to the identified performance deficits.

Understand the Relationship between the Performance Symptoms

Suboptimal Quality, Cost and Delivery results of the value stream typically have a share in the performance deficits (significant symptoms) recognized as needing to be addressed. Organizations typically attempt to solve for those symptoms on multiple fronts simultaneously. This presents a dynamic causing an unintended separation of focus and authority, and competition for the valuable resources that complicates the execution of the plan.

What is not readily recognized, is these symptoms more often than not have certain common causes. Recognizing this and acting upon
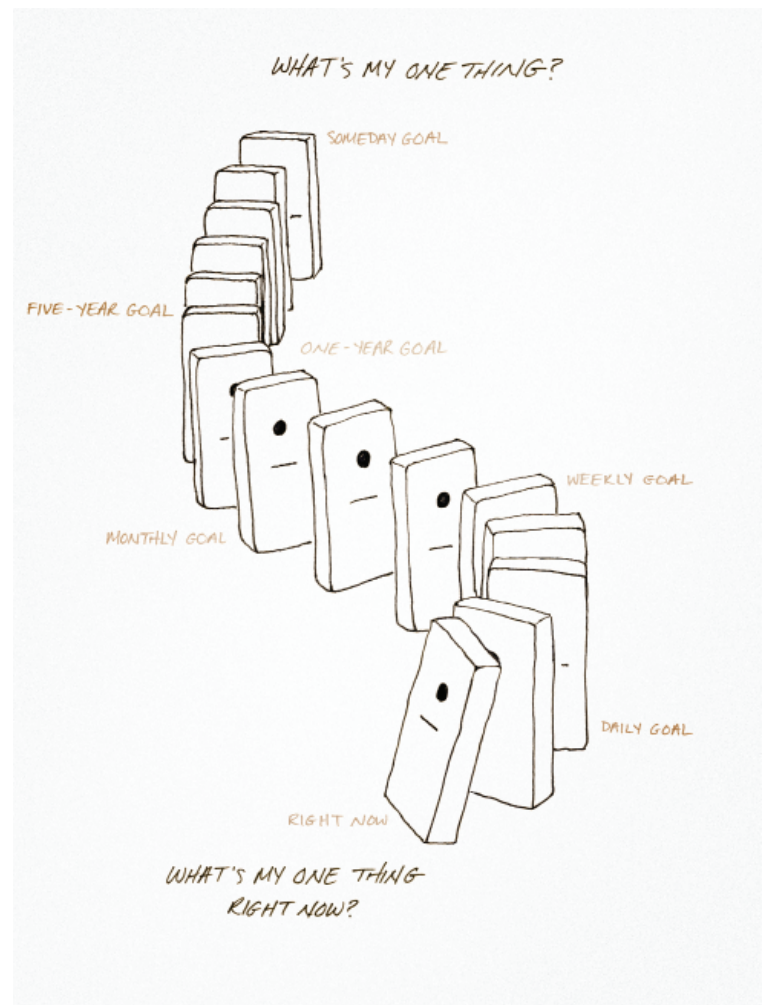
Source: Keller, Gary (2012) The One Thing, pg. 153, Austin, TX: Bard Press

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it can revolutionize the effectiveness and efficiency of getting solutions implemented for the symptoms. Rather than moving out quickly and broadly from the recognition of the symptoms with teams to solve for those symptoms, the critical symptoms approach conducts a combined and thorough analysis of the interrelationships between the processes in the system and the root causes within those processes. This approach allows the organization to develop an understanding of the full effect of cause (aka Causal Chains) on the complete set of symptoms.

Determine the Critical Symptom

A critical symptom is the single most threatening business condition. It is the one thing that left unaddressed, presents the greatest level of risk to an organization. Therefore, the critical symptom should generate the highest sense of urgency to survive in the near term while working to satisfy the strategic needs of the business for the long term. Because the critical symptom is linked in part to those other significant symptoms at various points in the value chain, work to remedy the critical symptom will directly and positively affect other symptoms. In the instances where there is no direct relationship through cause, the critical symptom causal chain is emblematic of what is occurring in other areas. Solving for the one thing, the critical symptom, has far-reaching direct and indirect positive benefits.

As an example of a direct benefit, consider poor quality in any part of the system and its negative impacts to delivery and cost. As the poor quality is solved, the other symptoms are reduced or even eliminated. The indirect benefits occur as the results of having solved the quality

problems are realized, reducing the magnitude of the symptoms associated to delivery and cost, and making their discreet root causes more obvious. This clarity will increase the velocity and effectiveness of solving those other discreet root causes. By focusing on the critical Symptom and its causes, an organization will effect changes that benefit multiple performance indicators and contribute to lessons learned that can be leveraged to affect change in other areas of the organization.

Do Not Act until You Fully Understand the Root Cause(s)

The due diligence required for the critical symptom approach can be difficult for an organization in turmoil because action is the preferred behavior. However, acting before there is a comprehensive understanding of cause and its impact across the set of symptoms will result more in frustration, complications, contradictions and duplications of effort. Worse yet, the actual systemic root causes will remain.

Before taking any action, it is important for leaders to hold their position and require an adequate level of understanding on root causes, as well as understand the full impact of those causes and determine which of those causes is the most critical to address. Once the organization has a full understanding of the cause and adequate resources at their disposal, the organization will best prepared to execute the plan and solve for the root causes.

If you are interested in finding out more about tools that can help you Increase Performance and Sustain Gains feel free to contact MainStream GS at info@mainstreamgs.com or 877-785-4888.

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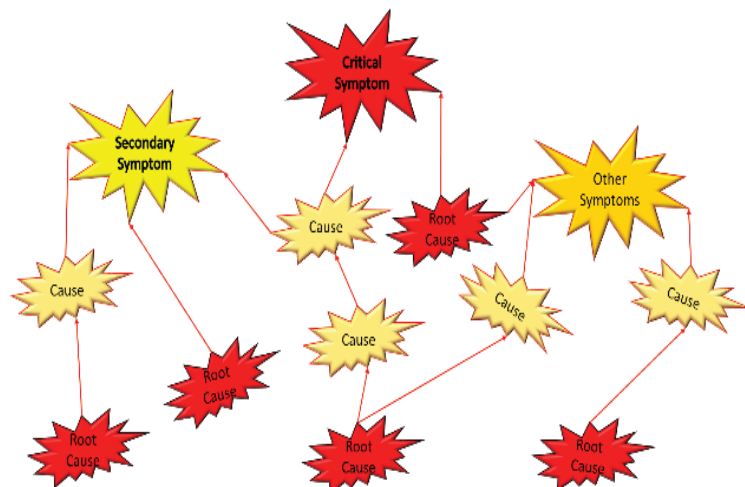
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