

Operation Excellence: Thinking Correctly Under Pressure



Olympic athletes focus on excelling for a particular period of time - a week, a day, or 9.8 seconds. There is enormous pressure whilst they compete, sometimes denying them the very time to think. It becomes instinct - but only because they have trained for all eventualities. The focus, the routines... they are all prepared. Then they can relax, safe in the knowledge that they did everything they could.

In business we don't have the luxury to relax. The competition doesn't stop performing at the end of the week. Achieving Operational Excellence has been described as being like refurbishing an Airbus A380 while flying at 30,000 feet. How can you deal with that pressure? In business we have to prepare whilst we compete. If people and organisations are not prepared for these pressures then they underperform, like athletes who don't quite make the grade.

To help you prepare for this pressure here are five important, tough, re-occurring choices that need to be made to achieve operational excellence.

1. What do we want to achieve in our operational excellence journey?

What is our goal? What is our currently targeted end result? We have to ensure the whole organisation understands the goal we are aiming to achieve, so all the resources can get aligned behind this common purpose.

A manufacturing supplier to the rail industry had a cycle time from components to finished product of 80 days. Over five years this has been reduced to eight days. They have removed waste throughout the process and re-thought their approach to design, engineering and supply chain management. Yet they started with a goal. Their target is now five days. Unthinkable from where they were five years ago.



2. How will we engage and sustain the involvement of the leadership team?

Engaging with the leadership team on a successful transformation journey requires an enormous amount of trust and respect. Trust that people can do what they say they can do and respect for how they go about it. This trust and respect allows people to believe.



The leadership team should know what motivates the individuals they rely on to help the team succeed. Otherwise how will you know the best way to help them or vice versa?

The CEO of a telecoms organisation planning a £1bn acquisition had established a senior team of people who have all experienced success in their own right, they are all aligned on how they are going to change the business model. They are all in there for the long haul because they trust, respect and believe in one another.

3. How will we scope the business process value stream and what are our priorities?

Prioritisation is not a new phenomenon. We all get it. Do the things that have the biggest impact on the business, don't just focus on those things which are urgent today.

It is not difficult for an automotive electronic component supplier who was spending more than €1m on premium air freight to realise that something was not working perfectly. To remove this symptom of poor performance there has to be an understanding of what the contributing factors and the causes actually are. Providing a focus and scope for a business process value stream analysis is imperative. Know your boundaries, the end result and the inputs. You have to start with these points before working out how things get done and at what cost.

4. How effectively will we measure success?

To lead effective change, focus your measurements of success on behaviours, attitudes, skills and knowledge which directly support the activities that yield the results. If all we do is manage the results, it is very difficult to correct or coach the underlying behaviours, attitudes, skills and knowledge when we don't get the results we are looking for.

We work with the agricultural division of a large company in Africa. They understand that the measurement of business results, while important, is not the only measure of change. Results may not come for a considerable amount of time. Therefore identifying leading indicators of change becomes of primary importance.

5. What cultural behaviours do we need to build and sustain so that every day is our best day?

These cultural behaviours need to be tightly aligned to the declared strategic imperatives for the company.

Kepner-Tregoe worked with a specialist printing ink manufacturer. While they had just been a supplier of screen ink, variability in product quality could be tolerated as the screen ink process allowed for plenty of human intervention. However, there is no such luxury with digital ink – the future of the business. The quality of the ink had to be consistently excellent. This required a complete cultural shift in the design and manufacturing processes – a 100% right first time philosophy. Structured, disciplined quality procedures were defined and deployed throughout the business. If things weren't done right there was the prospect of machine users seeking compensation for damage done. So what was the end result? The behaviours also became part of the way of doing work in making screen inks with associated efficiency and through-put benefits.

In conclusion:

If we don't do the right things in the right way when there is no pressure, how can we expect people to do the right thing when the pressure is really on?

Effective, decisive action is always preceded by clear thinking. However, clear thinking is a skill that needs to be refined, coached and practiced in an everyday environment – ready for the time when people are under that immense pressure, when time is short and with little opportunity to react.

Talented Olympic athletes look for specific coaching even at the top of their game. How well are you and your team prepared to think under pressure?

About Kepner-Tregoe

Founded in 1958, and based on ground-breaking research regarding how people think, solve problems, and make decisions, Kepner-Tregoe provides a unique combination of training and consulting services to improve quality and effectiveness while reducing overall costs. The KT methodology is used at every level of client organizations: to implement strategy, achieve continuous improvement, increase customer satisfaction, and drive effective issue resolution throughout the organization.

