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The Five Priorities for Critical Decision-Making

Speed with Discipline

This central tenet of operations for the U. S. Air Force Life Cycle Management Center was recently established by its Commander, Lieutenant General C.D. Moore, and it captures in just three simple words a universal goal: the need to reduce lead times and cost while ensuring the work is done right the first time. But this goal often creates tension between managers and the work force, especially when safety is at stake.

This was my dilemma as a manager in the '90s at an aircraft component repair shop, when my constant challenge was to get components repaired and placed back into stock better, cheaper, and faster. As I communicated this goal to my department, my technicians were adamant about one thing. They would not compromise safety or their livelihood by expediting any process.

And I couldn't blame them. I was licensed, too—I could absolutely relate. In industries where there is a safety factor for technicians in the execution of tasks, there is a whole different dimension of danger to compromising safety and compliance. And as a manager, I would of course be held accountable for any safety or compliance issues.

But I had a process improvement initiative to implement, and I was getting nowhere. I needed to be able to define how to execute the Speed with Discipline concept in a way that satisfied my conscience and that would alleviate the technicians' concerns.

I debated about speed versus discipline in my head over and over again, but I continued to spin my wheels until I found a way to articulate, in my own words, how to reconcile the challenge with my own supervisory responsibilities. I needed a compass to guide me for whatever hot requirement arose, be it a flavor-of-the-month request or pressures from my superiors, technicians, inspectors, auditors, or finance department.

I decided that a list of five priorities, in order of importance, would be my compass regardless of the situation.

#1: Safety. No task is worth risking the safety of our customers or each other. We will ensure the safety of the users of our products by making sure we take the time and steps necessary to achieve the level of quality necessary. To ensure the safety of our co-workers and ourselves, we will follow the guidelines in our organizational policies, and we will have a monthly "stand-down" to ensure safety items are in place.

#2: Compliance is a checklist for safety; we will follow our policies, processes, and technical manuals. Naturally, organizations that are not in compliance are shut down. We will work to revise the processes that can be improved. In the monthly stand-down, we

will include time to audit ourselves to ensure that we maintain compliance.

#3: Quality. We will perform our tasks to the point where we meet all of our technical requirements, do the job right the first time, and improve the length time between removals. To be most effective, we will focus extra attention on the top five issues that affect the quality of our outputs.

#4: Productivity. We will enjoy increases in productivity through safety, compliance, and quality. However, we must constantly look for ways to reduce effort through process improvement and staying focused on the job at hand.

#5: Economy. To improve job security in an increasingly competitive environment, we must try to find less expensive ways to execute our processes without compromising safety, compliance, or quality.

I tested the order of these priorities against all the metrics that I was being held accountable for as well as any operational emergencies that might arise, and I found I could easily come to a resolution with integrity each and every time. Now the challenge was to get buy-in from my organization.

My first move was to share the priorities with peer managers and higher management to make sure there were no holes in the thought process. The list was received well—in fact, the priorities were implemented in a similar form in the higher organization.

The next step was to win over the technicians. By giving credence to their dilemma and providing them with a tiered decision-making strategy with safety as the top priority, I was able to reassure them that they would not have to compromise their integrity for the organization's goals. The monthly stand-down demonstrated that safety and compliance were regarded above productivity and economy. This gave us unity of purpose as we implemented a very successful process improvement initiative that lowered costs and increased quality and productivity.

Finally, to maintain emphasis on the priorities, I changed the weekly staff meeting to a daily battle rhythm. The shorter daily meeting started with direct reports to discuss operational issues. Then each day of the week focused on one of the five priorities: Monday included Safety Representatives; Tuesday, Compliance Representatives; Wednesday, Engineers for Quality Improvements; Thursday, Green and Black Belts for Productivity; and Friday, Finance Representatives for Economy.

Speed and discipline really are compatible. The key is that leadership must make these five priorities explicit and use all five in the decision-making process, never allowing the push for improvement to rank ahead of safety, compliance, and quality. **AM**