

How to Set Your Organization Up for Success

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

One of the biggest obstacles to organizational success that I see is an inability to distinguish between outcomes and inputs. This misunderstanding shows up most prominently, and causes the most damage, in organizational goals. Confusing inputs with outcomes has unintended negative consequences, such as mediocre performance, wasted resources, dissatisfied customers, and unmotivated employees.

Outcomes describe the ultimate desired results – the “what” the organization seeks to achieve, such as providing seamless customer service (a construction company) or creating a safe and enjoyable recreational experience (a campground). *Inputs* describe the steps that must be taken to achieve the outcomes – i.e., the “how,” such as providing “one stop” service or maintaining clean camp grounds.

Using the above examples, let’s take a look at what happens when inputs are mistaken for outcomes or ultimate goals.

Construction company input/goal: Ensure “one stop” customer service by having customers talk to the same contact person each time.

Campground input/goal: Maintain clean camp grounds.

Both “goals” sound good, and it is difficult to see anything negative about them. But when these inputs are represented as being the organization’s goals, they have a chilling effect on performance. Here’s why: when the task at hand (the input) is mistaken as the end result, employees stop when they have completed the task even though it is only one component of the desired outcome. They have no way of knowing that they should be approaching the situation more broadly and creatively by seeking to ensure that all possible elements of “seamless service” or “a safe and enjoyable recreation experience” have been addressed. By focusing mistakenly on inputs, no matter how well stated and necessary they may be, the organization has set itself up to fail to achieve its desired outcomes.

What can be done to correct the misalignment that occurs when inputs are mistaken as outcomes? Here are eight steps you can take to ensure everyone in your organization is focused on outcomes instead of on inputs:

1. Ensure the organization has clearly articulated business outcomes. Make the critical distinction between outcomes (the “what”) and inputs (the “how”).
2. Determine whether, or to what extent, your employees and managers understand those outcomes.
3. Paint a clear picture of the outcomes in ways that enable employees to see and feel those results.
4. Specify the connection between each employee’s job and the outcomes, then identify what’s in it for each individual personally to aspire to those outcomes.
5. Identify measures that assess progress in achieving the outcomes.
6. Provide employees with the tools to achieve the desired outcomes.
7. Establish a system of accountability.
8. Celebrate successes by rewarding or recognizing achievements along the way.

The most important step, and one you can start doing today, is to make the critical distinction between outcomes and inputs. After all, if you don’t know clearly where you are going, how you get there really doesn’t matter, does it? ➔

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