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Some people – management, leadership – think the most important function in their company is sales. Some others think it's marketing. Some think any function that touches the customer is the most important – or the collective group is. And some think it's the function that they perform – the CEO, CFO, R&D specialist, or the salesperson.

I don't want to tell them they're wrong – they could be right – but I actually know the most important function in almost any company. It's the one that keeps customers from buying from you. It's the one that causes most valued customers to call the CEO (at home!). The most important function is the one that causes customers to buy from your competition. It's the one that creates an overworked service department.

Want me to be more specific? Unfortunately, I can't. The most important function is dependent on one (or more) of those functions that cause the just described scenarios (or others – each business has to describe its own symptoms). But whatever that function(s) turns out to be, it's the most important because it's keeping the business from reaching its goals – goals that are dependent upon customers – lots of satisfied, loyal, perpetual customers. And it needs immediate attention!

Goals are complex in their own right. For example, a goal of \$X of revenue has several sub-goals: the desire to gain the revenue at a “reasonable” cost, to use just so many resources (e.g. people, capital equipment), have a “good-enough” quality level suited for the market, and allocate an optimum amount of time to deal with service issues. Attaining each sub-goal uses several different business functions, possibly the “most important one.”

Let's say quality is the “reason” customers don't buy from you. Since quality, in this sense, is a set of characteristics and not a function (no, the quality group is not entirely responsible for the “quality” of the product or service), you have to ask yourself “Why is the quality not what it needs to be?” Now you are starting your search for the most important function (don't forget, it could be several). Could it be the inability of marketing research to find out what characteristics are most important to the targeted customer group? Could that, in turn, be a poor information gathering process or skills that need updating? Or maybe it could be something to do with the customer's inadequate capabilities to use “new” technology and the “product rollout” function overlooked that detail due to the lack of resources, time, or tools.

In this example, it's possible that quality wasn't the reason. If any of the questions asked above were answered affirmatively, then it's possible that the specifications were not defined as clearly as needed. The “root cause” isn't quality but some “most important function.”

The point I'm trying to make? Although some functions might be “worth” more to a business, all are important to the success of the business. Otherwise, they wouldn't be part of the enterprise. Since they are all important, any one of them could cause the business to either falter a little, fail, or something in between.

This means you should do three things: First, understand how your business' functions work together (as, in a “system”). Build a function “map” and look for the intersections, dependencies, and overlaps. Second, find out which function is the “most important” by assessing for the operating quality level of each of the functions, and their characteristics, you need and use to meet your business' goals. Third, build and implement improvement initiatives, keeping in mind that your business functions do indeed act as system. Improving the “most important function” should go hand-in-hand with improving your company's other “most important functions.”

So, now do you know what the “most important function” is in your company? It does take work to find out and to fix!