



## **Meeting Customer Requirements**

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I was recently working with the sales department of a lumber company. The salespeople felt overwhelmed with the amount of work and the crises that they dealt with. A time consuming part of the job was called a “take off”. This is where the salesperson reviews the blueprint for the builder and puts together the list of materials that the builder will require. This becomes the builder’s order. It is a very complex process and appears to have a number of problems. Each “take off” was painstakingly created, even though many of the builders built the same houses over and over. The salespeople did not have a standard or formatted “take off” that they could use as a template. To flow chart this process did not seem to be realistic. Instead, the group agreed to do a work sampling study using Conway Random Timers. When the timers went off they would check off what they were doing. They agreed to fill in great detail about all the steps in the “take off” process so that they could collect enough detail to learn about that process in particular. They knew going into this project that a number of the problems that they dealt with daily had to do with problems, errors and complexities as they interpreted the builder’s needs into the order.

By completing a work sampling

study they would be able to identify some of the major causes of rework and errors in this process and begin to work to improve.

As it happens, my brother is a builder and had been a customer of this company. At a family dinner he asked me how my job was going and I filled him in on the “take off” project. He was thrilled. As a customer of this process he knew only too well the waste caused by mistakes.

“Even in the custom homes, 80% of the order is repetitive,” he said. “I see the same costly mistakes over and over.” “It’s one of the reasons I will not do business with that company.” Unfortunately, as far as

I know, these salespeople never saw this project through. But for the longest time my brother would hopefully ask me what improvements were being made. This is an example of how the waste in the sales work was the reason for the lost sale, not to mention how much confusion these errors cost the company. These sales people were too busy working on the waste to fix this problem. What a missed opportunity! Imagine

how much fun the sales call to a builder would be after the “take off” process had been improved? Think about the increased sales, reduced errors, happier customers and employees, and reduced cycle times.

World-class organizations are striving to reduce cycle time so they can become primary suppliers. How much of the cycle time, that is from when the customer requests a proposal or places the order until the customer receives the order, is tied up in the sales process? Remember, focus is on the process, not the people. Asking them to work harder and finish the paperwork

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quicker will not produce the improvement in the results to the extent that improving the work will. As you study the work, ask yourself to consider the vital few, are you working on the most important things, are you spending the right amount of time on the things that matter to your customer?