



Its all happening at the Zoo! Quality through Leadership.

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(Photo Credit, Marilyn Monda)

Last month, I met Jeff Foster, Director of Performance Improvement at the San Diego Zoo Global at the OPEX Summer Conference in San Diego, where we discussed Kaizen events and how they transform businesses. What follows is our subsequent conversation, about his leadership approach to integrated quality improvement at one of the most diverse work environments you will ever see.

**MM:** Please tell us about yourself and your early career and what brought you into the quality position at the World-Famous San Diego Zoo.

**JF:** I spent 25 yrs in hospitality (hotel operations) prior to joining the San Diego Zoo Global Organization, and gained my certifications – BB, MBB, Lean and Master Lean all through the hospitality industry. I came to SD Zoo Global organization 7 years ago. They were interested in establishing a quality program, quality control, Center of Excellence. They got my name from the friend of a friend and we had a conversation about how to set that up. One thing led to another and they asked me to join them, to drive the train.

**MM:** When did the zoo get started utilizing Quality Improvement?

**JF:** The Zoo didn't have a formalized program in place prior to my arrival. They were not doing formal quality control and process improvement. There was a gentleman on the exec team with a hospitality background who brought in consultants to do some process improvement projects. The zoo organization was very excited about the results of those projects and that is what led to the conversations about hey, can we do this ourselves?

**MM:** Can you tell us about those early projects?

**JF:** Yes, one looked at the way the elephant keepers moved around within the exhibit at the Safari Park and the Zoo. Another was around the hours of operations in our retail operations in the Safari park and the Zoo and looking at compression, locations and the lay of the land to see if there was a better way to do that. Both projects resulted in some ah-ha moments for our organization that then resulted in financial gain.

**MM: What are some of the Zoo's strategic quality goals? How do you decide where you want to focus?**

**JF:** The San Diego Zoo Global is a conglomerate of 5 businesses and each has different goals. At the Safari Park and the Zoo, which are revenue generating, those goals are related to cost reduction for the most part. In Conservation and Research which are pure cost, we look for return on mission (versus return on investment), which is measured primarily in our ability to expand our conservation work or take on additional scientific research projects within the same cost structure. Finally, in our Administration Business we focus on reduction of overhead.

**MM: What are you working on now?**

**JF:** I get to play in all five businesses. I was standing with a scientist in a lab yesterday and today I was in the sales department in our administrative arm. So, I get to bounce around a lot. Recently we are working on a couple of revenue centralizing ideas, taking distributed tours at our two campuses, for instance, and gathering them into a place that allows us to leverage and have more synergy between them so we can operate and do more with the resources we have. In conservation, we have a project going on with our Frozen Zoo and another project related to Participatory Conversation, which is a way to engage the public with our conservation work on a more personal basis.

Each of these projects are very different, and we use several different analysis tools within those projects such as root cause work and market analysis. We approach projects like we approach our problem solving - which is in a Kaizen way. We find a problem and do something different to see if we receive a different result. We build on our successes and we let go of our failures.

**MM: Do you have colleagues in Quality Improvement at the Zoo?**

**JF:** I don't have my own team, I wish I did! We utilize shared goals. Each leader within the five different businesses has as one of their 5 goals one that relates to my work. Everyone has a Quality Control goal. I am responsible for helping them achieve those performance improvement goals.

**MM: So, you are not hiring quality professionals per se?**

**JF:** We include quality improvement discussions as part of the hiring process. But if you have a black belt background and you are an animal keeper, we want to talk to you really bad!

**MM: What would you say is most important factor for your successful Quality Improvement work at the zoo?**

**JF:** Relationship management. And that includes trust and leadership development.

**MM: What are you most proud of in your work at the zoo?**

**JF:** I am most proud of the distance we have come over the 7 years I have been here and the amount of impact I have been able to have. Organizationally, we don't make decisions without having some conversation about the process and the benefit to the organization. We have conversations now in a structured way that includes all the points of process improvement that we, the organization, were not having before I came here. We discuss the impact to the current situation and where we want the future state to be. I think that is what I am most proud of. We are getting quality into the DNA of the organization.

**MM: Any final words for our member leaders? Advice for leaders beginning to put quality principles into play?**

**JF:** My advice would be to be patient! Nothing happens overnight. When you are shifting culture and mindset in an organization. It happens very slowly, to the point of glacier slow! You don't think things are happening, but when you look back over some distance you notice there has been a change. So, my advice is to be patient and persistent, stick to your subject and your knowledge and stick to the logic because it will prevail eventually. It just takes some time.

And remember, it is the little wins, that first little win that leads you in an easier and faster way to the second little win and so on and so on. You build steam as you move forward to the point it no longer becomes a win, but the way of doing business. We have a lot of tenured associates who are passionate about what they do and what we do, and sometimes you must wrestle between the passion and the emotion and what makes sense from a Business Process Improvement standpoint. It is a balance and you must understand that balance. Because too much of one or another and you will fail.