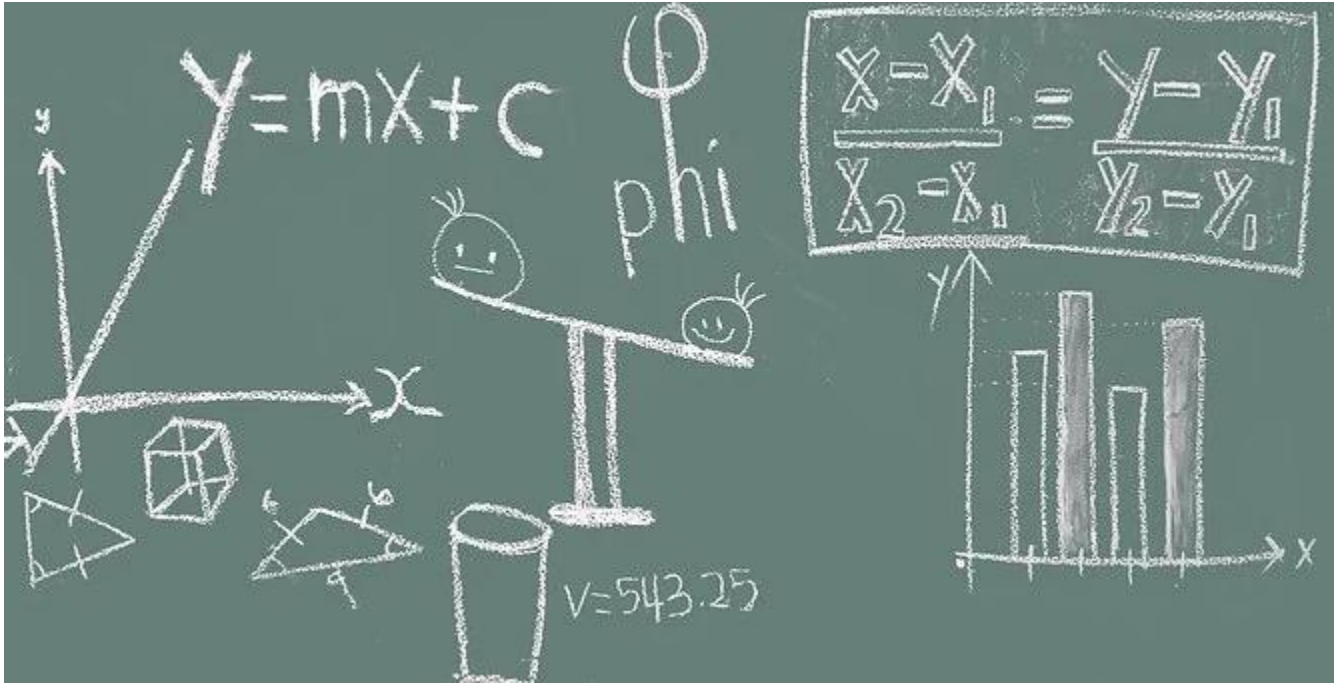


Excellence for the wrong reasons- Lessons Learned

EFA case study



One of the best experiences to learn from are “failures”.

Our client, EFA (Excellence for Award), was a small but well-established company. The leader of the organization had a relatively good knowledge of Excellence Models (or what we thought initially) and his previous organization had won an Excellence Award. At the head of EFA, he was hoping, once more, to lead another company to achieve a prestigious recognition in Excellence.

EFA leader was seeking the assistance of experts to help his team develop a winning submission.

Our company was referred to them, we took the job and started an interesting journey of discovery with the organization.

The objectives of the projects were two:

- Achieve the certification of an integrated management system against ISO 9001, 14001 and 18001. (They had no systems initially)
- Apply for the National Quality Award

This article will summarize the journey we had for over 18 months working with the team of EFA to establish a good foundation for Excellence, certify the integrated management system of the company and prepare a strong Award submission document.

As for every project, the initial groundwork constituted of (i) understanding the organization, its context, challenges, (ii) identifying the “current status”, (iii) getting to know the leadership style and the team working at EFA, (iv) suggesting an improvement action plan, and (v) accompanying EFA through the Award submission and assessment, and the IMS certification process.

One of EFA manager’s, who will be named RO (representative of the organization) in this case study, was assigned to coordinate the project with the consultant.

After couple of meetings, it became obvious what challenges the project will face, that the current state as described by the EFA leader and RO was quite different from the real situation and that the company is on a rough path.

As per the contractual agreement the project started with 2 days onsite assessment exercise which confirmed our initial findings. It was crucial at this stage of the project to have the highest level of transparency with the leader of EFA and draw an honest picture of the “As Is” situation from an Excellence standpoint. As the project included drafting procedures for the organization’s integrated management system, the charge was double.

Our team’s initial findings:

- There is a disconnect between the leader’s perspective of the organization and the perspective of employees at all levels, and those within the circle of the organization managers.
- Due to the challenges of the sector in which the organization operates and the company’s focus to become more efficient, turnover of employees has been extremely high. Old staff were resistant to the changes that company needed to implement. Cooperation between new staff and old staff was lacking.
- EFA leader failed to get the buy-in of the senior managers of the organization in the new plans and the need for certification and improving the processes and systems and performance of the organization. Pursuit of Excellence was for the wrong reasons.
- The company was far from being ready for the certification and the Award. The previous consultant who developed the procedures of the organization did a great job on paper, which remaining unverified in the day-to-day transactions and activities.
- There was lack of honesty between the team and the leader, in everybody’s attempt (especially the new managers) to please their leader.
- While EFA had a wonderful vision, mission and strategic map, and a good performance review process, the performance was always below par.

With these findings our challenges as consultants grew bigger.

First step was to review the project with the leader and RO of EFA.

It was easy for the RO being the Operations Manager and closer to the team, to comprehend and acknowledge the challenges shared. While a conversation with the leader of EFA was always leaning towards him trying to convince us that there are gaps in our assessment and there much more than we see. His team members were conveying a different message. Mostly new members, they could not

demonstrate or provide any further information or evidence, and yes, certainly, they were not convinced that the old team had more done on matters such as CSR for example. Couple of events in a year, used for marketing purposes, but no structured and measured program.

Our biggest issue was to mirror our findings to EFA leader, transfer the messages received from his team, without impacting the trust that the new team was starting to build. A tough mission, if not successful, it would jeopardize the success of the project.

Couple of meetings were scheduled with EFA leader and RO to discuss and agree on action plan for improvement and in preparation of the key project milestones, Award Submission, and the IMS Certification. As a result, we executed a customized training program for the team and assigned specific departmental tasks and activities to complete.

In all encounters, it became more obvious that the RO and EFA were not on the same page. Few weeks later, the RO left the company, and put the project in a bad spot. But not only the RO, the HR manager did leave too. With the pandemic starting, there was pressure on the company to restructure and use the Group's shared services to reduce cost.

The Executive Secretary of EFA leader was assigned the project leadership in replacement of the old RO. She was totally new to Excellence and Standards. A plan was put in place to support her development process. While the lady was very enthusiastic to take in this new role, her other job duties were always given a priority over the Excellence project.

During all this time, our team continued working on the submission document, the ISO integrated management system and requested several reviews from the team, in parallel with the improvement action plan implementation.

As the project progressed, we did another analysis of the status of the project and the challenges faced:

- Team buy-in was very weak, at all levels, senior and junior. While they verbally confirmed to their leader their support, their actions demonstrated otherwise. The team review of documents and action plan was not serious, and not productive. While we shared the challenges, we are facing with the department heads, engagement remained minimal and junior staff were assigned the tasks related to the project without proper guidance. Regardless of all our efforts to work with head of departments and their team members, there was no improvement. The new managers' focus was on business challenges and Excellence was one of their least priority, they even did not understand why it was on their agenda during these challenging times, they missed meetings and deadlines without remorse.
- The change in management was a major disturbance to the progress of the project. The team was confused, not knowing what the future will bring.
- While EFA leader had the best intentions, was sincerely believing in the organization capabilities, and had previous experience with Excellence models, his knowledge of the Excellence Principles was limited. And there was no proper adaptation of best practices used in other organizations in a way that suits EFA. EFA leaders message lacked aspiration and motivation for the team. "EFA Excellence Project" was for the wrong reasons and seemed like everyone implicitly understood this. This applied too for the IMS certification project.

- Previous consultants who supported the organization lacked transparency in terms of the current state of the organization. Beautiful systems were put in place, without proper engagement and implementation to allow sustainable results.
- The focus of organization and its leader was on quick wins.
- The organization did not have the Excellence maturity level that would allow them to succeed in their submission for an appreciation award. Results tracking and evidence from previous years were missing. However, if a serious effort would have been deployed over the project period of 12-18 months, it would have had a major impact.
- While, our team of consultants had developed a correct submission document, there was no one in the team having proper knowledge to lead the assessment process, and continuously align the submission document with the latest changes at EFA.
- The Integrated Management System procedures remained on paper, unimplemented. The same challenges were faced, and the team did not put enough effort to implement the newly developed procedures and improve their current practices. The Executive Secretary, assigned as the Quality in-charge, did take the necessary trainings to support the implementation of the IMS, however, she was always swamped with all her other tasks, and hence several implementation gaps were identified during the certification audit.

As the organization's consultant we did delivery on our part, submitted the required documents and suggested plans to support the implementation of the improvements needed and which would have impacted positively the organization and its results. We diligently worked with the leaders trying to sort out the challenges identified and help the organization have a shift in its people's mindset and perception of Excellence. Unfortunately, all this was in vain, as finally, EFA leader left the organization, the certification process was not completed, and the Awards submission was not pursued.

Our journey with EFA was an interesting journey, full of learning. The constant review process that we had to go through provided us with several insights into how we should act as consultants to ensure an efficient planning and delivery process.

So here are our key lessons learned as a consultant:

- 1- Spend enough time on understanding the "culture" of an organization in a project planning phase, it is critical for the project success.
- 2- Regardless of how the organization wishes to conduct the project, use a good project management methodology and feedback mechanisms. Make sure every step of the project is given the needed time for an optimum result.
- 3- Spend necessary time sorting out problems at an early stage of the project.
- 4- Never fear challenging the senior management of an organization, make sure you are equipped with the right arguments/evidence to do that.
- 5- When the initial conditions of a project change, make sure that this is well-documented and that a proper project review is done accordingly. Especially when the number of changes is significant and hard to control and manage.

- 6- For Excellence models implementation, enough time should be allocated for the training part, if the organization cannot ensure team attendance of Excellence trainings as necessary and planned, that a sign of how far the project can go and successful it will be.
- 7- This case study confirms that when an organization chooses to implement and use an Excellence Model, in the only intention to win an award, this is not enough to drive change within the organization and improve current management practices. Change of mindset is critical, and takes time and effort, and should be led from top down. Project timeline should take this into consideration.
- 8- Even when assumptions are agreed in a contract, they need to be well acknowledged by all stakeholders involved at the project kick-off stage. Accountabilities need to be highlighted frequently.
- 9- Assigned people to lead an Excellence project in an organization need to have enough credibility among their peers for better buy-in.
- 10- Excellence is not a quick win; it is a journey that requires all stakeholders buy-in.

About the Author



As a COES with Organizational Excellence Specialists, Nancy Nouaimeh strives to spread the word around the OEF model and the importance of the Global OE Index for organizations and countries to measure up and improve. She is a self-driven, result-oriented, organizational excellence, quality & safety professional. Building on experience since 2002, her efficient leadership and coaching style and creative approach to knowledge transfer have enabled continuous improvement projects that support the delivery of strategic and operational objectives, service enhancements and building capability across people, processes and systems. She can be reached at nancy@organizationalexcellencespecialists.ca