Improving Services for Children in Alternate Care
Through the
Principles of Excellence

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Improving Services for Children in Alternate Care
Through the Principles of Excellence – A Case Study

by Sunil Thawani

All children in the world have the right to grow up in a supportive family environment that supports their physical, psychological, social and emotional development. Sadly, many children get separated from their parents and placed in alternative care for variety of reasons such as removal from family due to risk of harm, death of parents, abandonment due to poverty, discrimination etc. As per UNICEF, worldwide, an estimated 2.7 million children live in residential care - and the actual figure is likely much higher.

Depriving parental care to children and unsuitable alternative care can cause immediate and long term damage to the development of children. They can endure physical, psychological, emotional and social harm – with consequences that last a lifetime. These children are also more likely to experience violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Given this backdrop, a visionary and highly caring CEO of Alternate Care Services organization in the Middle East engaged us as consultants to improve their care and services to children, enhance transparency, performance, policies, customer experience, processes, and adopt international best practices. A major transformation initiative was rolled out in 2020, this project was done with **Ms. Jannet M. Acol**, (http://ae.linkedin.com/in/jannetacol/), a Quality & Excellence Management Consultant. For us, it was another great opportunity to serve vulnerable segments of the society and help improve their lives.

Current State

After a detailed review of the organizations' mandate, relevant national laws, current policies, processes, performance, customer feedback etc. some of the key findings were:

   a. The applicable laws and the mandate were not evident if fully implemented. Management somehow knew it is implemented but there was no clear evidence / measurement of the same;
   b. Children development journey was not mapped sufficiently. Different functions had different views of the journey. It affected proactive planning for the next stage of development of children and youth including their societal integration e.g. providing timely counseling on secondary schooling to select appropriate programs for university education;
   c. Inconsistency in delivery of services to children and foster families e.g. delays in issuance of official letters needed for school admission;
   d. Lack of clarity and agreement on roles and responsibilities among different functions and levels of people e.g. conducting risk assessment for safety and protection of children;
   e. Apparent "silo" working relationships among departments. Getting work done seamlessly in an efficient and timely manner was challenging and a constant struggle among employees;
   f. Processes were not defined and documented resulting to inconsistent service delivery;
   g. Ineffective management and control of records e.g. health or financial records of children were accessible to many employees in the organization causing concern to children that their personal and sensitive records were made known to many;
   h. Largely paper-based work environment causing delays, rework and lack of continuity;
   i. Lack of collaboration and integration with other relevant external agencies involved in children identity, development etc.

As a result of above, services to customers, namely children and foster families, were inconsistent and not satisfactory. They resulted in rework, errors, delays, lack of transparency, performance and distrust.

Strategy for Enhancing Customer Service, Governance and Performance

Using the principles of Excellence, governance, quality management, customer satisfaction and continuous improvement, the following strategy was adopted:

a. Understand needs and expectation of various customer segments;
b. Review and enhance service offerings and their delivery channels;
c. Align applicable law & mandate with Customer needs, Services & Procedures;
d. Identify, review, improve and document processes and map their inter-relationships. Build role clarity among functions and people;
e. Cascade applicable law & mandate into policies, processes and procedures. Adopt best practices and international standards;
f. Establish/ review and improve measures of performance – perception and Indicators. Adopt benchmarks and international standards and frameworks;
g. Automate/ digitize services;
h. Use management systems and performance measures to build accountability among people;
i. Develop people – knowledge transfer, manage performance.
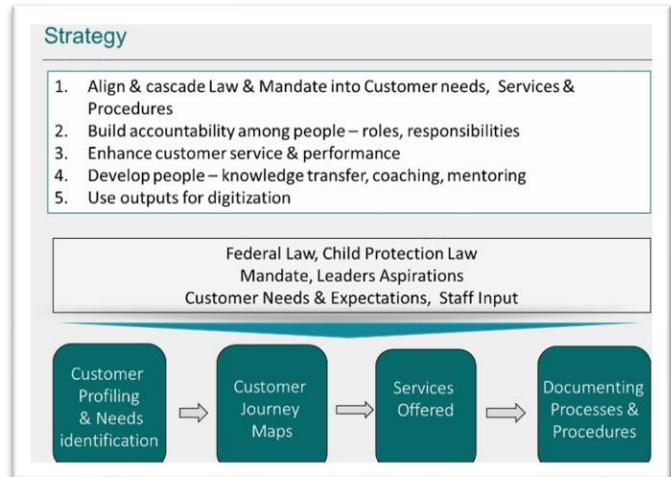
The following aims to share the practical implementation of the strategy.

Having read and understood the organization's mandate, applicable laws and listening to employees, the logical starting point was to focus on customers i.e. Children at different stages of their development such as young kids, youth, adults, married men/ women and Foster families. We set up several focus group meetings to understand their experiences, expectations, improvement opportunities and day-to-day challenges. Some of the key findings of customer focus groups were:

a. Children were very appreciative and thankful to leaders of the nation for taking care of them – they were provided of healthcare, education, protection, housing, integration into society etc.
b. Foster parents were indebted to leaders for bringing lifelong joy and family happiness by having a child to foster.
c. Areas needing improvement were protection of information & data privacy of children, simplifying policies and procedures, automating/ digitalization of services, supporting youth in finding employment and counseling at different stages of their life.

The outcome of the focus group sessions helped develop clear and detailed understanding of customer needs & expectations of various customer segments for the attention of leaders, managers and employees. It laid the foundation for service improvement, digitalization, improving processes and
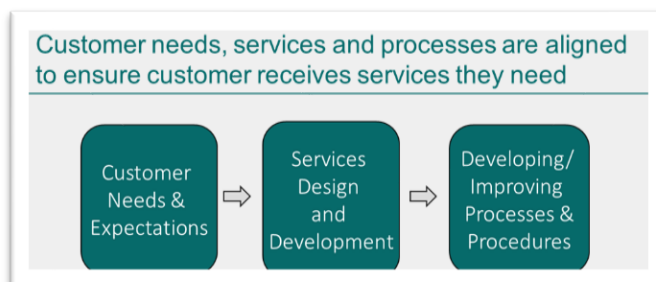
creating a culture of customer centricity.   A detailed **Customer Profiling Manual**, covering all customer segments, was developed.

② Services Offerings

From the customer needs and expectations of different segments, we reviewed the current service offerings and compared them with what was expected by customer – covering entire lifecycle of child i.e. from Infancy to Independence to inclusion in society. A total of 40+ services are being offered, naming some as Providing identity for the child, Providing basic living needs, Managing comprehensive health care, Enhancing awareness about safety, security and protection, Providing education including higher education, Instilling noble values and morals, Support for marriage, housing, employment, entrepreneurship and many others.

Service offerings were mapped to the mandate thereby verifying whether the organization is providing all the services to its customers as per the mandate or not.

For each service, a "**Service Card**" was developed listing details of each service such as Name of the Service, Description, Owner, Delivery channels, which segment of the customer is being served etc.

Customer needs, services and processes are aligned to ensure customer receives services they need

Customer Needs & Expectations ⇨ Services Design and Development ⇨ Developing/ Improving Processes & Procedures

For effective management of services, a **Services Portfolio Manual** was developed capturing essential information for each service. This is to ensure services remain current, support digitalization of services, and create a culture of service in the organization. This also helped ensure alignment between organization mandate and customer needs with services offerings.

③ Customer Journey Maps

Mapping customer journeys are essential to enhance customer experience. Though most organizations know how customers engage with them, it is still useful to map end-to-end customer journey from the customer's point of view. Detailed customer journeys were mapped for various customer segments for Children as well as for Foster family. Considering child development and care from infancy to independence, the customer journeys mapped were long and stretching across multiple channels and touch-points. Mapping customer journeys helped:

a. clearly define Child development journey stages - from Infancy to Independence – leading to better planning child's development and alignment of resources and programs;
b. identify all the key touchpoints with customer;
c. digitize services including communication messages for customers;
d. identify various stakeholders involved at different stages of customer journeys - internal & external;

e. bring together all functions responsible for each part of the journey and break "silo" working into process-driven culture of delivery;
f. design customer surveys etc.

④ Policies, Processes and Procedures

Understanding customer needs and aligning services to serve those needs is not sufficient. The organization needs effective, efficient and adaptable policies and processes to design and deliver the services. Poorly designed processes adversely affect productivity, performance, deliver inconsistent and error-prone outputs to customers and stakeholders leading to customer dissatisfaction and adverse impact to corporate image etc.

In line with service offerings, all the core business processes and policies were reviewed with long held practices and paradigms challenged. Customer needs, employees' suggestions, best practices and laws were integrated while updating and documenting the policies, processes and procedures. E.g. Developing Comprehensive Developmental Plan for Child, Evaluating Readiness of Youth to Become Independent, Child Protection and Risk Assessment etc. International management systems standards such as ISO: 9001 (Quality Management), ISO: 31000 (Enterprise Risk Management), ISO: 10002 (Customer Complaints Management Systems) etc. were referred and embedded.

Many other supporting policies and processes of Finance, Human Resources, Procurement, Strategic Partnerships, Corporate Communication, General Services etc., which were critical to functioning of core business processes, were also reviewed and documented. With core business processes improved and aligned with strategic focus, the existing Recognition Program for Care Givers, Social Workers, Strategic Partners and Foster families were improved.

Identifying/ discovering and rediscovering existing processes and mapping their inter-relationship brought many benefits such as:

a. recognition that it is processes that deliver service and not functions;
b. ensuring there is a well-defined process for each service to be delivered;
c. managing business through set of inter-related processes;
d. well aligned and integrated processes are essential to seamless, smooth and efficient working – within and beyond organization boundaries;
e. developing people about services and building customer focus mindsets, risk-based thinking etc.
f. clarifying roles & responsibilities and enhancing accountability;
g. improving the way work is done and enhancing performance.

⑤ Best Practices

"Guidelines for the Alternative Care of the Children", issued by United Nations, were used as a reference to compare existing work practices and services and identify improvement opportunities covering different stages of child development and topics like Family Integration, Foster Care, Inspection and Assessments Field visits, Child Protection, Health, Competencies of Caregivers, and Social Workers etc. To

evaluate the applicability of Best Practices, simple and effective assessment criteria in terms of relevance, impact and cost was developed and applied.

⑥ Performance Management & Global Benchmarks

To develop an information system that will provide transparency and help organization to better monitor and improve the situation of children in their care, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Perception Measures were developed including commonly used global Benchmarks such as Children leaving residential care for family placement, Children in residential care attending local school and Satisfaction of Foster families with services offered.

⑦ Digitalization

Digitalization of services to external and internal customers was an integral part of the transformation plan. Priority was given to automation of services offered to customers i.e. children (through Caregivers), youth, adults and foster families before moving to automating internal processes. The IT Project Team worked closely with us throughout the project to accurately form their understanding of customer needs, expectations and challenges, customer journeys maps, service offerings to different customer segments and process flows for delivering those services through various delivery channels.

Though it is commonly talked about in theory, various functions such as Strategy, Quality, Operations and IT working together in digitalization initiative rarely happens in reality. This was a unique and rare project where all stakeholders worked in active collaboration and great team work. This approach helped IT team to develop accurate and fully aligned Business Requirements Document with customer needs and service offerings.

Concluding Thoughts

Applying principles of excellence in organization committed to serve vulnerable segments of the society has been highly gratifying. The project also contributed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) on Good Health (SDG # 3), Quality Education (SDG # 4), Gender Equality (SDG#5) and Reduce Inequality (SDG#10).

Benefits/ Impact

1. Organization now has a clear and detailed understanding of:
   a. Needs & expectations of all its customer segments
   b. Child development stages - from Infancy to Independence – well defined (journey maps)
   c. What services are offered to which segment of customer and at what stage of their development
   d. Mapping of Services to organization mandate.
   e. Mapping procedure to services
   f. Accountability & responsibility among staff
   g. Clear work flows and procedures
   h. People development
2. Improving children's development, safety, automation, culture of customer service, performance and role clarity etc.

It demonstrated that principles, concepts and techniques of Total Quality Management (TQM) work very well in social sector of the economy. Imagine the impact and benefit of applying TQM principles and practices in achieving UNSDGs.

The Author

Sunil Thawani is an author, speaker and fellow of American Society for Quality (ASQ). He is CEO of Quality Indeed Consulting Ltd and champions United Nations Sustainability Development Goals 2030 (UN SDG). He currently serves as a Board Member of Dubai Quality Group.

He has a successful track record of building and transforming organizations which are highly customer-focused, continually improving & differentiated in marketplace for excellence.

He has served as a Jury member of Dubai Quality Award and Sheikh Khalifa Excellence Award. He regularly participates in international conferences on public services, innovation, UN SDG 2030 organized by United Nations.

Sunil is a recipient of the prestigious ASQ Lancaster medal. He has travelled all over the world on a motorcycle (www.worldwideonwheels.com). He can be reached at contact@qualityindeed.com

The Consultant Team
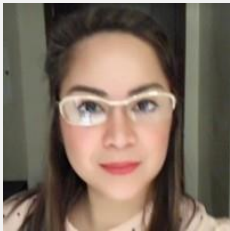
Jannet Acol is a Consultant and experienced Project Manager for Business Excellence, Quality Management, Governance, Strategy, Business Transformation and Data Privacy implementation.

She is an MBA degree holder from Strathclyde Business School, Scotland; a European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Model serving as senior assessor for Dubai Quality and Dubai Human Development Awards.

She has lead and delivered initiatives on customer satisfaction, strategy development, process re-engineering, digitalization, employee training & engagement, employee recognition scheme, service standards development and external recognitions/quality awards in both local and international categories. She has extensive experience in multiple sectors such as hospitality, financial services, real estate, insurance & broking and government.

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