

# Measurability and Commitment Drive Foodservice Quality Improvement

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Efforts to improve foodservice quality hinge on commitment at all levels of an organisation and the measurability of results. In a recently published research paper, the SHTM's Dr Jaksa Kivela and a co-author evaluate the application of a "Six Sigma-hybrid quality system" to the Hong Kong Jockey Club's foodservice operations. The researchers show that differences in perceptions of the change process from senior management, middle management and rank and file employees meant that the quality culture improved more than the associated organisational culture. This sort of partial success, they note, is a common outcome of quality improvement programmes.

## Measuring Service Quality

"Quality service", write the researchers, "is important because it is directly linked to customer satisfaction and return behaviour". It is also determined by the organisation as a whole, including both management and staff in a "symbiotic relationship", especially in foodservice organisations. Yet reports about the effectiveness of quality systems in such organisations are lacking,

How, then, does one measure foodservice quality? The researchers point to Six Sigma, a statistical measure of process performance, aiming for near perfection through improvement and involving a management system that ensures lasting results. Six Sigma, they argue, focuses on "the organisation's exacting customer needs" and does not cover operational considerations such as labour costs and sales volume that are "not related to what the customer really requires". The method also provides "a consistent way to measure and to compare different quality processes and initiatives".

The aim of achieving near perfection might not seem reasonable, but the researchers note that in some

situations, "seemingly low levels of defects can result in irate customers", especially when intangible products are offered, as is the case with foodservice organisations. The need for this extremely high level of achievement must be "hammered into all members of the organisation", but with the major "ideas, solutions, process discoveries and improvements" taking place in the organisation's frontlines.

The Six Sigma process is based on teams composed of employees from different departments and with different "job levels, backgrounds, skills and seniority". Together they "devote themselves to analysing and improving key processes", solving organisational problems and capitalising on opportunities. Their role is to define measure, analyse, improve and control, with the ultimate goal of sustaining change.

## At the Hong Kong Jockey Club

The researchers chose the Hong Kong Jockey Club as a setting for their investigation because it is one of Hong Kong's largest employers, operates foodservice outlets at multiple venues and had implemented a Six Sigma style "Journey Toward Excellence". They speculated that this process would facilitate dialogue between foodservice management and staff to enhance quality practices, evaluate the organisation's "best practices", improve the organisational culture and through it quality practices, and improve the quality mindset of its managers and rank and file employees.

A survey evaluated perceptions of how important and applicable the Journey Toward Excellence was to the Jockey Club. Of 112 respondents at the Sha Tin Club House, the Happy Valley Club House and the Bees River Country Club, 15 were senior managers, 65 were middle managers and 32 were rank and file staff members from back- and front-of-house operations. A majority of the

respondents was male and nearly half had worked at the Jockey Club for at least five years. A large majority had participated in service quality training.

### Employee Reactions

Perceptions of how important the Journey Toward Excellence precepts were and how they were actually applied varied according to staff level. The researchers note that senior management were not satisfied with the use of focus groups and teams, graphical tools for evaluating progress and numerical measures for determining the extent of success. Staff members at this level were also dissatisfied with the extent to which the organisational culture promoted high quality, whether supplier relations could help to maintain that level of quality and the ability of the process to create high levels of customer satisfaction. They were, however, happy with “the involvement of all levels of staff in the decision-making process”.

The middle managers were particularly pleased with the use of focus groups and teams, the use of benchmarking in rating the success of the process and the continuous improvement apparent in the organisation.

Amongst the rank and file staff, note the researchers, concerns were raised about the use of benchmarking, whether a “systematic, fact-driven approach to solving quality problems” was fully applied, the use of numerical measures to determine success and “the use of customer focus groups as a feedback mechanism”. Yet, like the senior managers, they were pleased that all levels of staff were involved in the decision making.

### Service Quality Outcomes

The researchers note two major outcomes of the Journey Toward Excellence, which have implications for other foodservice organisations seeking service quality improvement. The process improved the Jockey Club’s quality culture but had a lower than expected influence on its organisational culture. The organisation could also have enhanced its measurement of improvements at certain stages, but lacked sufficient historical data for comparison.

These limitations, the researchers observe, are not uncommon. They point to similar situations with Six Sigma programmes at Motorola and General Electric. At the Jockey Club, the senior managers and rank and file staff obviously had different perceptions of the process, particularly its importance and how it was applied. Nevertheless, the researchers write that the organisation was “tremendously successful in training and educating” its staff at all levels about the principles of the Journey Toward Excellence.

Indeed, mass participation in the overall programme allowed senior management to identify the gaps between the importance of a quality improvement measure and its actual application, and thus to create solutions that would minimise those gaps.

To summarise, write the researchers, the Jockey Club was successful in implementing most of the Journey Toward Excellence measures, but not all of them.

### Points to Note

- Extremely accurate service quality measurement is necessary in foodservice organisations
- Six Sigma is a method of defining and implementing service quality improvement.
- The Hong Kong Jockey Club’s Journey Toward Excellence enacted Six Sigma principles.
- Mass participation and accurate measurement at all stages are crucial to Six Sigma success.

Kivela, Jaksa and Kagi, Jacky (2008). Applying Six Sigma in foodservice organizations. *Tourism*, Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 319-337.