Showing value in support

Finding ways to demonstrate that a support function delivers value is a common problem.

Many support functions face criticism from the business constituents that they serve. Business stakeholders are often highly sceptical about the value delivered because they fail to recognise how the support function contributes to business success and the challenges involved in effective service provision.

There are four key areas that, if successfully addressed, will enhance the business's perspective of value-add.

1. Strategy Alignment

Ask yourself:

- Could your business customers read your strategy and clearly see how your initiatives help them realise their goals?
- Is the linkage between your strategy and overall corporate objectives clear?
- Have you engaged in a healthy debate with your customers to understand, probe and challenge their key initiatives?

Clearly, support functions have to link their programme of work to the overall business strategy. An obvious statement perhaps, but all too often support programmes are not articulated in terms that resonate with the business. Where the linkage is not overt you risk leaving the business with a perception that you are off pursuing your own set of isolated objectives.

Play back your support strategy to your constituents, confirming understanding, educating them of the role that you plan to play and setting their expectations accordingly.

2. Transparency

- Ever faced criticism about your lack of responsiveness?
- Frustrated because your business customers don't realise how many competing agendas you are trying to serve?

Businesses lack an understanding of the breadth and nature of work that a support function is trying to address.

Openly publish your programme of work. Be prepared to provide a cost/benefit justification for all activities in which you are engaged, be they business facing or infrastructural in nature. This helps to manage the expectations of the business community and provides a more overt linkage as to how budgeted resources are being spent.

3. Control

A consequence of pursuing this transparency objective is to provide the business with a degree of control over the programme of work you are pursuing and its associated expenditure. The services that you provide will be

charged back to the business units in some way (whether above or below the line), and to levy charges without an ability to influence the way in which those funds are spent is a source of consternation.

Key to a successful working relationship therefore is a governance forum that links your functional leadership team with their senior business customers. A well-documented and transparent process through which work is evaluated, budgeted and prioritised onto the overall programme is required, with clear criteria in place to determine how relative priorities are set. It is beneficial to engage all your business customers via a common mechanism to govern this process.

4. Proactivity

Rumblings will usually be heard from the business community to the tune of, "We could provision these services much cheaper elsewhere". At some time in the business/support function relationship the outsourcing agenda will be floated.

Meeting this challenge head-on is critical; don't hide under the covers and hope that the outsourcing spectre will go away.

- Be proactive about finding benchmarks that relate to the type of service that you are providing and the environment in which you are providing it.
- Seek comparative benchmarks that you can use to sense-check your function's performance, and set objectives based on desired movement against these indicators.
- Share these with the business - if there are good reasons why your benchmarks are worse than comparative indicators, discuss how you and the business can work in partnership to address certain areas.

Exposing the cost drivers will likely highlight ways of working with your business customers that influence the cost position you are able to deliver.

The upshot?

None of the above suggestions will hold water unless your service function can demonstrate a reliable delivery capability. That is foremost. However, by successfully addressing the four areas outlined above, you can begin to reposition your support function as a value-added partner to your business customers.