

*Horizontal Interaction During Strategic Improvement Initiatives: A Study
Involving Six Quality-Oriented Organizations*

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University of Wisconsin--Madison Ph.D. Dissertation

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Dissertation Abstract

Leaders of organizations launch strategic initiatives to improve performance in areas such as customer loyalty, profitability, product innovation, and regulatory compliance. Many researchers have suggested that horizontal interaction is an important factor during such initiatives. Horizontal interactions, such as those that occur during multifunctional meetings, represent first-level links that link members of different organizational units. This dissertation introduces the concept of a second-level link that connects horizontal interactions together. Second-level linking is a type of meta-linking that appears to be an important factor affecting strategic improvement initiative success. Six major types of linking mechanisms are examined: people, focuses, information, conceptual aids, principles, and standardized elements.

This qualitative study investigated horizontal interaction during strategic improvement initiatives at six quality-oriented organizations including two Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winners. Case study and grounded theory methods were used. Data originated from interviews with seventy-six managers, the examination of internal and external documents, and personal reflections and observations.

Two major findings emerged during the study. The first confirmed that horizontal interaction was perceived to be an important factor during strategic improvement initiatives. This finding (1) provides evidence to support similar assertions which have appeared in the literature and (2) shows general horizontal interaction theories may be successfully applied to the strategic improvement initiative context. The second major finding introduced the concept of linked horizontal interactions that occurred during strategic improvement initiatives and uncovered six major linking mechanisms. This finding is important because (1) linking horizontal interactions may enhance lateral organizational capabilities, (2) linked horizontal interactions can be designed into strategic improvement initiatives during event planning, and (3) simply incurring more horizontal interactions during strategic improvement initiatives may not lead to greater success unless the horizontal interactions are effectively linked.