

The President's Message

By Dwight Comer CPIM CIRM CSCP

“Let's all KISS the Dashboard”

Boy Dwight, you've really lost it this time! What are you talking about? “Let's all KISS the Dashboard?” Well, KISS is our old principle (Keep It So Simple) this will especially apply in the area of metrics and Dashboards, and Dashboards are something that any self respecting operations management person should be very knowledgeable in.

First off lets look at the term dashboard. I wonder if you were aware that it is something of an acronym? Let's take the first part of the word “Dash”, there are different versions but for instance “Data Analysis Scorecard Home page”. While it can look a bit like an old fashion dashboard in a car that is more of coincidence than a deliberate plan. The key thing is that a good dashboard should have some basic principles applied. In keeping with the KISS principle we need to apply the “three second rule”. If you can't (or your customer can't) figure out what we are measuring in three seconds, then we missed the mark. It should be obvious. Also it needs to be uncluttered. For instance if we have a pie chart that has 25 different colors being displayed then not likely any one's going to get quality information out of that. Try re-grouping the data at a little higher level.

A term we all use but probably don't know its exact definition of is the word “metrics”. It simply means, “measuring information over time”. So a dashboard helps us keep an eye on the KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) or metrics that drive our activities. If we are measuring the right data it will help drive the right behavior. Unfortunately too many metrics through the years helped move businesses in the wrong direction. Don't ever let that happen. The classic example of measuring the wrong things are the old efficiency and utilization statistics that pretty much guaranteed we were building product that we didn't have orders for. Also, one principle we teach in CSCP is that “Innovative” products may require a totally different set of metrics than “Functional” products. This is once again an example of measuring the wrong things.

There are new software products on the market to help you with the metrics task (that is displaying an effective dashboard). An example would be the application “Xcelsius”. One might wonder why would I need that? Doesn't it look a little like a spreadsheet? Well, yes it does but there are some key differences. For one, a spreadsheet will more than likely place you in a position where you have “open source coding” which basically means that your customer (or your competition) may be able to figure out exactly how you came up with that number. You probably don't want that. So then a “dashboard” application like Xcelsius will isolate the display from the data.

The other issue is connectivity. A product like Xcelsius can be configured to link to the latest data without someone having to do all the hand manipulation and the delays

associated with getting the latest set of metrics e-mailed to the key players. In today's Web 2.0 environment we want as many of our key drivers web enabled as possible and reloaded daily if we can structure the data to make that happen. It comes down to thinking through the requirements. What do I measure? How can I measure that? And finally how can I link and display that data so I achieve the greatest effect? A top-notch operations management person such as you should be equal to that task. However, your APICS professionals are standing by to give you a hand if you need one.