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Claims of high value returns on investment in facilities management are sometimes at odds with reality of what some people consider to be a commodity service with a poor reputation for delivery. Martin Pickard of The FM Guru Column asks the question:

Can FM Really Help Organisations to Achieve their Corporate Strategies?

Devotees of Facilities Management excellence often make a claim that a good FM strategy can be one of the contributing factors to the success of a client organisation. Some FM service providers go even further with attestation of valuable benefits ranging from the removal of all financial risk to saving of the planet itself. Other FM proclamations are more modest, with many happy to adopt the most humble of supportive servant attitudes in their efforts to provide an invisible back room, non-core service offering.

This confused positioning is one of many image problems suffered by the facilities management industry. Brian defined FM at the British Institute of Facilities Management dinner in 1977 as a low-profile, low-value view of FM is in direct contrast to the value generating, world beating image in the glossy brochures

The Official View

The BIFM definition of Facilities Management says on its website that Effective facilities management, combining resources and activities to the success of any organisation. At a corporate level, it contributes to the delivery of strategic and operational objectives. This statement is one of many that appear to promise high levels of effective contribution from application of FM discipline.

However, the BIFM revised definition of Facilities Management in 2006 adopted the European Committee for Standardisation definition of the integration of processes within an organisation to maintain and develop the agreed services which support and improve the performance of the organisation. This sustaining position is much more akin to the back room view of FM than their other more assertive statements and is closer to the message regularly broadcast

The only trade association representing the enormous and influential industry, the Facilities Management Association (FMA) in the UK is taking control of 'non-core' services, freeing organisations to do what they do best while managers aptly describes the role of many facilities service providers who specialise in relieving businesses of distracting commodity management but hardly inspires investment in excellence.

A Strategic Contribution

Meanwhile the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) has launched a campaign called Professionalising FM with the stated aim of helping

This flows on from the RICS publication in 2009 of a guidance note on The Strategic Role of Facilities Management in Business Performance and reflect the RICS position as the only UK Institute currently offering Chartered status to professional Facilities Managers.

The RICS and others who have promoted the value of facilities management take the delivery of commodity workplace services as a foundation stone which more significant contributions can be developed. The challenge is one of evidence measurement. In 2004, Professor Price of Sheffield Hallam University argued that to move the whole FM discipline forward to one which is seen as business critical rather than low risk support services, then facilities managers need produce the evidence which demonstrates the contribution to business.

Business critical issues like efficiency, productivity, sustainability, reputation, risk and the battle for talent can all be directly enabled by an effective facilities management strategy. These are issues that can keep the most senior board member awake at night and will certainly grab their attention long before a report on plant maintenance or space utilisation. High performing FM professionals consistently position their reports with zones of business activity.

FM as a Commodity

Unfortunately it is much too easy to find examples of facilities management in action that does not even approach such lofty heights of strategic ambition. There is a stereotypical image of a facilities manager tucked away in a basement office surrounded by boxes of toilet rolls, key cabinets and a reputation with every failed promise and faulty light bulb.

Meanwhile some service providers are only too happy to deliver mediocrity to undemanding clients who, without specification, no performance measurement and informed client function can operate the radar for a very long time enjoying a very comfortable existence while pocketing operating margins the greediest investment banker.

When a support function like facilities management shows itself to be incapable of keeping things clean, invite them to participate in the corporate strategy process or to engage with them in meaningful dialogue. If the service cannot be trusted to deliver facilities functions the organisation is more likely to restrict the FM operating remit to those areas where they can do harm.

Centres of Excellence

Unfortunately situations like this are far too common leaving facilities management with a negative reputation in the minds of the general population. Those who do provide a more professional service generally go relatively unnoticed despite the valiant efforts of organisations like the FIM

BIFM and RICS There are many organisations where FM has turned into an art of delivering a polished and professional performance each and every day just like the service in a five star hotel.

In these centres of excellence client expectations are regularly exceeded and continual effort is made to improve results and to contribute to core goals. The culture and values of the organisation are well understood and reflected in the FM operation with appropriate language, processes and service offerings. Results are measured by their impact on core goals, and every FM team member understands the contribution that they are making towards achievement of a greater vision.

This contribution oriented approach can be realised in a host of ways. Examples include the FM team in a manufacturing business who speeded up the production line by clearing packaging waste in a more efficient way; The facilities team at a shopping mall who reduced service charges by harvesting rainwater and turning cooking fat into bio fuel; or the office manager who reduced absenteeism with a campaign incorporating healthy eating, personal fitness and improved air quality.

What it takes

There is no reason why any organisation could not benefit from the contribution that can be made by professional facilities management, but we want to rely on the efforts of a few visionary FMs, a number of fundamental things need to change in our operating environment before that can happen.

The first of these must be a series of campaigns like that of the RICS led at raising awareness