

Cereal PROBE Case Study

Syngenta Seeds

Syngenta is a major supplier of seeds, and a leading cereal plant breeder, breeding new varieties of wheat, winter barley and spring barley for the UK and elsewhere. If you have recently enjoyed a glass of beer, or a shot of whisky, there is a high probability that it contained one of Syngenta's varieties! The company's Cereals Division completed a Cereals PROBE benchmark in May 2006, and repeated the exercise in March 2007.

Why PROBE?

The PROBE process provides an opportunity to assess the company's performance and practice objectively away from routine daily operations. The identified strengths and weaknesses can then be acted upon decisively to drive business improvement.

"We came across PROBE in 2006, through a promotion that the Cereals Industry Forum did at the HGCA conference. It coincided with a time when, as a company, we were focusing on what was needed to move us 'from Good to Great', so it fell in nicely. We had done work

to study individual aspects, but PROBE enabled us to study the whole Division. It appealed to us because it would help us analyse our procedures and practices to see which areas we should concentrate on in future."

- Simon Phillips, Head of Product Development



Syngenta's PROBE team
May 2006

How it worked for Syngenta Seeds

Cereals PROBE drew upon the knowledge and experience of a team representing the full scope of the Cereals Division's activities. At the heart of the process is a questionnaire which combines leading edge business theory with more than a decade's experience helping thousands of companies worldwide to benchmark their practices and performance against Best Practice standards.

"The business is seasonal and freeing staff to take part was a major concern. But it went very well, and team members said afterwards that they had dreaded the thought of doing it, but enjoyed it when they did it. It has delivered staff development benefits as a way of involving employees from all areas to better understand more about the business, and about our ongoing efforts to get better and better."

PROBE challenges how things are done, particularly in areas such as communication, leadership, people management, and customer feedback.

The team developed a consensus view about how they rated current practices and performance, then the PROBE facilitator immediately analysed the data and fed back a profile of how Syngenta measured up to an holistic model of organisational excellence.

The results were very encouraging, highlighting many strengths that the Division can build upon. The immediacy of the feedback gave the team a quick and effective means of identifying opportunities for further improvement.

"PROBE helped us to identify areas where we could make improvements. It concentrated our minds in the areas to take us on that next step."

Planning, acting and monitoring progress

Syngenta's PROBE team digested the feedback from their first benchmark and proposed actions. In parallel with beginning to implement changes, the Division broadened involvement in benchmarking by pulling together a second PROBE team, with only one person common to the two teams. Ten months on, the second PROBE benchmark was completed.

"The main benefit was broadening involvement in a very developmental process. The results were similar, which helped us to see that the Division is working as a team. It also provided some useful reinforcement of what we had learned from the first PROBE, and some new ideas also emerged that have helped us to refine our plans."

Among other things, the second PROBE-based action-planning session focused on the need to ensure that important staff development activities do not move down the priority list in the drive for leanness and efficiency. It also reinforced a focus upon driving non-value-adding activities out of 'back office' support processes.

So, on balance, had the effort of two benchmarks been worthwhile?

"Oh certainly! Well worth it. This is continuous assessment, something that you have to do to help your company move forward. It is something that we ought to be doing again in two years time, to see what progress we have made."

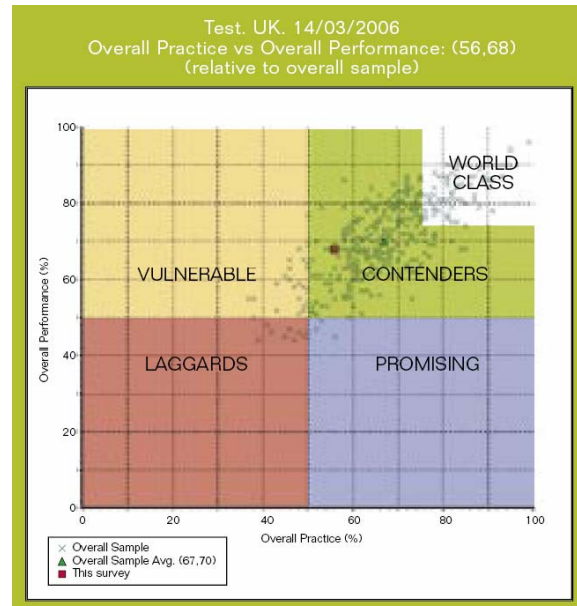
What is PROBE?

The Cereals PROBE methodology has its roots in research on World Class manufacturing and service quality led by IBM Consulting (UK) and London Business School. The PROBE database contains over 6000 individual site benchmarks from 32 countries across a wide range of sectors.

Cereals PROBE is based upon a generic model of 'best practice' which is presented to the team in the form of a questionnaire. Comparisons against the generic model and those companies on our database are shown in practice and performance terms. An example of the practice-performance positioning chart is shown here. All data is kept strictly confidential and the graph represents an anonymous example.

Strengths and opportunities for improvement are identified across a spectrum of the organisation's activities. Every aspect of the business is covered.

- from understanding the needs of service users, to measuring their satisfaction
- from service design to the operational processes of day-to-day service delivery
- from leadership styles and strategy development to people development and the measurement of staff satisfaction
- Materials processing in the Cereals Industry
- New Product Development.



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