Appendix E – Root Cause (Fishbone) Analysis

The natural human reaction to issues or challenges facing an organization is activity. People try to solve problems quickly and in some instances actually make the problem worse by not truly understanding the root cause of the issue. The fishbone diagram is another simple tool with powerful results.

The Process

1. Once you have determined the issue to be explored, have a group of individuals brainstorm a list of causes. Understand that any cause that may be suggested by the participants might not be the basic root cause. This cause may in turn be the result of other causes. For example: In a recreation facility, there are a number of errors in the data collected in a customer database at the point of sale. An obvious cause may be “Wrong address keyed in,” but this may not in fact be the root of the problem. Rather, the problem may be the result of “Poor data entry screen design” or “Improper training of counter personnel” or “Wrong data recorded on forms used for data entry” etc.

2. Enter the causes you identify onto a fishbone diagram. This is a visual representation of the relationship between an “effect” and all the possible “causes” that influence it. It provides a structured and disciplined way of identifying root causes of a selected issue. Use headings such as Human Resources, Methods, Materials and Machines to provide more structure. This in turn will promote a well-rounded approach to the issue and prevent jumping to conclusions.

3. For really perplexing issues you may need to group causes from each of the branches into a similar theme and restate the issue.