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12/2/2015 Michelle Koss

## The Wall of Windows

*How an out-of-the box approach literally ended up on the wall—and led to transparency, collaboration and a whole new way of thinking. (The problem got solved, too.)*

**Michelle Koss**, director of operations and client services for Employee Benefits and the 2015 winner of an ASPIRE Award for Excellence in Execution, is known for her openness to ideas and solutions that some say are "unachievable." Her approach opened up a process so everyone on her team could help improve it. Here's how the Wall of Windows idea came to life.

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Thirty-five percent of our business for the entire year is written on **Jan. 1**, so every October, November and December, we're slammed with new customers. A little over a year ago, our team was working on a better way to get our January business on the books without a hitch. I was new on the job—I'd started back in March of 2014. We had already taken part in an

Operational Excellence workshop, and we'd mapped out the process, identified swim lanes, taken on assignments. But I felt like that "Ah-ha Moment" was missing.

We'd always had a very linear process for dealing with the new business. It was like a Thanksgiving dinner where, instead of timing all the food to come out at the same time so everybody could sit at the table and eat together, we'd say: "Hey, we need corn. Let's make corn." Then: "Hey, we need mashed potatoes." To get past that way of thinking, we all had to agree that overcoming it was our biggest challenge.



*Michelle Koss's "Wall of Windows," which was a key driver in identifying a more efficient way to get new business on the books, still stands today on the 28th floor in the OneAmerica Tower.*

## A window opens

One day, I grabbed a stack of Post-it® notes and asked the supervisor of the area, **Clay Lingerfelt**, to teach me the process. Clay is the supervisor of contact administration in Employee Benefits, and he reports to me. To make sure I understood, Clay and I put each step of the process on a Post-it note and stuck it on the wall.

We ran out of space pretty quickly, and we had beautiful windows, so we moved our work to the windows. That's where the "Wall of Windows" idea came in. People stopped by and made comments, and we weren't quite done yet, so we left the Post-it notes up overnight.

The next day, someone left a stack of hundreds of Post-its and window markers with a note that said, "Keep going." The person who left the note? **Jim McGovern**, the head of our division. That kick-started it.

## Pitch-in power

We asked the people on our team: What are you doing at a desk level? If you could change one or two things to have an impact, what would those be? We identified three or four things, and we realized we needed IT to help us get those things done.

People pitched in and said, “I’m going to hang on and put my things second so you can have my IT resource.” It was a selfless act on several people’s parts.

IT was on board. They were able to run with it. It wasn’t just my team. It wasn’t just IT. It was a beautiful collective of people coming together with a common purpose and feeling empowered to solve a problem.



## Idea machine

Once we got our new process in place, we realized there was too much to do. So we used our window to create an idea list—things to do, things we were working on, things we’d gotten done. People were engaged. If somebody had an interest in a particular area, he or she could grab the item (on its Post-it note) and put it in their category. That way we knew who owned that step.

We kept learning new skills on the fly from **Corinne Carlson** and **Michael Burris** in Operational Excellence, who helped us capture the process, train people to do it and tell the story through metrics and measures.

The result was collaboration and transparency. Everyone could help fix the process or step in and do their part. Nothing was off limits. If someone had a passion, they could run with it. It was all free rein. If someone wanted to take part, we’d say, “Come in and help us move forward.” It was easy for people to see and take part in change.

It took an army to get us there, but now our team performs at service levels we never would have thought possible.

## Start a conversation

How can you create your own “Wall of Windows”? [Read more about Michelle’s tips for creative problem solving](#) and how she finds inspiration.