

June 2018

Approaching process improvement

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Our lives and the world around us are in a constant state of change. Why then, do so many organizations struggle to make time for continuous process improvement? There are a lot of programs and tools out there – including Six Sigma, Lean, Kanban, 5 S's, Kaizen and TQM – so it is easy to get overwhelmed. However, you do not need your staff to have months of training to enjoy the benefits of continuous improvement. While many organizations have reaped the benefits of in-house continuous improvement programs, a great deal can be gained from a quick and easy review process.

In the change management and continuous improvement process, there's one approach that can drastically increase your success: involve the workforce in the review and redesign process as much as possible. People resist change that is imposed on them, but if they help define the changes, they will be more motivated to implement them successfully. The front-line staff are also closest to the work. They experience the issues first-hand, so they are in great position to know what needs to be addressed.

Here are some effective and simple steps you can take in reviewing your organization's processes, ensuring they are efficient and meet the needs of your customers:

Map the current process – Meet with appropriate staff and document the current process. Create a visual representation of the process flow, which contains all the steps, and include any forms/paperwork used within the process.

Idea generation – Involve employees and stakeholders (people who are affected or involved in the process) in reviewing and identifying areas where there are issues, bottlenecks or ideas for improvement. Get them to write any comments on sticky notes, and place these directly on the process flow. Challenge assumptions and encourage people to ask, "How can we do this better?" The focus should be on critiquing the process, not the people.

Analyse – Evaluate all ideas, prioritize and make recommendations. It is sometimes helpful to categorize the ideas as: (1) quick win, (2) something worth pursuing (next steps to be

identified), (3) something which requires no further action and (4) something that does not need action now but may in the future.

Design the future process – Based on the analysis, design the desired process.

Approval – Obtain the appropriate approvals and make adjustments to the design as required.

Implement – Develop a plan to implement the changes to achieve the future process.

There are also a number of other steps you should take:

- Identify and implement quick wins as early as possible, in order to build momentum for the work being done. This is a great way to build energy and morale as the staff see their contributions making a difference.
- Process improvement does not have to be about reengineering the entire business. Much can be gained by focusing on small, incremental changes that gradually improve your operations. Over time, you will build a culture that adapts quickly to the changing environment.
- Challenge assumptions. It is amazing how often we do things because no one asked the question, "What value is this activity serving?"

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- Process improvement is about using existing resources as efficiently as possible, not reducing staff. Your emphasis should be on eliminating wasteful activities, reducing non-value activities and creating time for value-added activities.
- When reviewing each process, be sure to check there are appropriate activities related to quality and control.
- There may be times when it is better to bring in an external person to facilitate this process. An external person (whether external to the department or the company) can help you challenge assumptions about why you do what you do.
- Improved risk management – Through process improvement review, quality will improve, control deficiencies will be identified and corrective action will be implemented.
- Improved communication and understanding – By its nature, the review process builds team knowledge and improves team dynamics.
- Future improvements – This process will help perpetuate a continuous improvement culture within the organization.

Benefits of a process review

If you implement the continuous improvement steps outlined above, you will experience a number of benefits:

- Updated documentation of your processes – This leads to improved flow, efficiency and control. Updated documentation also serves as a training tool for new staff members and assists in cross-training should a staff member become unexpectedly unavailable.
- Improved use of resources – The organization will be in a better position to eliminate wasteful activities, ineffective process steps and the related labour costs.

The success of an organization is measured by the results it achieves. The excellence of those results is, in part, dependent on how well the people in the organization design, operate and continuously improve the organization's processes. You can have talented people working for you, but as the quality guru W. Edwards Deming once said, "A bad process will beat a good person every time." Encourage your staff to always look for ways to improve operations and the customer experience. Continuous improvement is a mindset, not a one-time event.

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