

An Accumulation of Successes...The Path to Sustainability and Culture Change

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In 2001, I heard a politician describe victory in armed conflict as a “patient accumulation of successes”. This phrase can also be used to describe the process of achieving success and sustainability with continuous improvement initiatives.

Improvement begins with a single success linked to a measurable goal. This success takes the form of an improved process and results in happier customers, empowered employees, and a savings in time and/or money. As successes begin to accumulate throughout a company, an improvement program will gain momentum.

Why is patience a necessary part of the process? There are two answers to that question.

1. Once you start an improvement initiative, there are four key elements that are affected:
 - what you focus on
 - what you measure
 - what you talk about
 - how you work together.

Changes in each of these elements define the essence of improvement. Both management and the workforce must be involved in changing these elements for their processes, and both will need time to embrace these changes.

2. The act of kicking off an improvement program creates urgency to address problems that have not been approached urgently before. This urgency may result in impatience as time passes and **the process of identifying lost opportunity dollars precedes the culture change required to go after them.** Impatience shown by management may sabotage the culture change opportunity as departments are pushed to report dollars of improvement before people develop the trust to speak freely about recurring problems or departmental issues that prevent progress. Patience at the top of the organization allows the trust to build as employees “wrestle” with change and identify improvement opportunities that may have been hidden problems until now.

You Are Here!

Continuous improvement should be viewed as a journey through process and time. It is important to realize at the start of any program that it will not be possible to get to Point B until you pass through Point A, even though you would rather be at Point B today.

The map below illustrates an “Accumulation of Successes” on the road to continuous improvement. It is a treasure map of sorts, with the treasures disguised as problems.

“You Are Here!” marks the starting point where poor performance and low morale are represented by rain clouds and a “sinking ship”. If the right continuous improvement tools and processes are incorporated into daily work practices, problems along the path will be viewed as opportunities and opportunities will be converted into financial results.

The wise owl on the map represents a company making the commitment to learn these tools and processes to begin its continuous improvement journey. The satellite dish

symbolizes effective communications, a deal-breaker in improvement efforts if left out of the scope of work.

After employees become familiar with continuous improvement tools and processes, it is time to apply them. If asked, every department in an organization could quickly list 3-5 chronic problems that “eat their lunch” every day, week or month. These problems are chronic because an effective method to permanently solve them has not been found.

There are four challenges or obstacles on the map that represent chronic problems in organizations:

1. a cliff that must be climbed to get to the top of the mountain
2. a tyrannosaurus blocking the path
3. shark-infested waters that must be crossed, and
4. a stopwatch that represents deadlines to meet in order to beat the competition.

Each obstacle is overcome using the same process:

- Problems are identified and their dollar impact quantified.
- Data is collected to verify opinion and the magnitude of the problem.
- Employees develop and implement action plans.
- Effectiveness of action plans are monitored.
- Dollars accumulate when a problem is solved. These dollars represent additional cash flow and employee satisfaction.
- Celebrations occur in the form of recognition and rewards as employees meet or exceed expectations along the way.

“An Accumulation of Successes” The Path to Increased Productivity and Profitability



“When will we be done?”

Managers and employees often ask, “When will we be done?” The answer is “Hopefully never!” There is a saying about endings: “Everything has an end except a sausage which has two.” My version reads **“Everything has an end except a sausage which has two and continuous improvement which has none.”**

Even though this map shows a beginning and end to the yellow brick road, in real life there is no end. When asking “When will we be done?”, the answer must be “NEVER” because changing the state of the four elements discussed on page 1 results in never going backwards to your former state. Lack of change in these elements for management or the workforce will result in stagnated programs with a **finite life, little value delivered, and little or no culture change (i.e., an end).**

The Right Tools + Involved Leaders = The Formula for Success

Employees must know how to apply the right tools in order to achieve new levels of performance; however, these tools alone will not yield the desired results and cannot guarantee a sustainable program. As more employees become involved in an improvement process, managers tend to assume that the program will drive itself because the participants will supply the energy and enthusiasm for sustaining it.

If we analyze programs that lost focus or energy, we will find that employees did gain enthusiasm for process improvement when they became involved. The dynamics that stole the energy and shifted the focus away from the program came from outside their immediate circle of influence (the management system).

Managers need to be involved at two levels to maintain energy and focus on any improvement initiative:

- **Level 1** – Managers must relentlessly champion the cause (i.e., display enthusiasm and dedication as part of the way they work). Having said that, “championing the cause” is still not enough. Unfortunately, many management teams have been told that this their most effective role in driving improvement.
- **Level 2** - Managers must also:
 - Honestly examine their management processes for improvement opportunities.
 - Resolve conflicts between the management system and improvement initiatives.
 - Be willing to change how they work and communicate with each other.

Level 2 Involvement – a critical and often missed process

The low-hanging fruit of improvement are those processes where employees have total control and authority over how processes are designed and executed. If employees experience “an accumulation of successes” with these processes, they can sustain their changes **UNTIL** there is a problem with a process that intersects with their work. **This is the moment that tests the sustainability of an improvement initiative AND requires management involvement that goes beyond Level 1 support.**

The Level 2 process provides management with the skills to address these types of conflicts, recognize organizational barriers as improvement opportunities, and remove barriers that prevent process improvements from being implemented. This process is one of the biggest missed opportunities in process improvement work. It ensures that:

- management system processes do not conflict with improvement initiatives,

- the management team is armed with a process to sustain improvement, and
- **“we will never be done”**.

If managers are not engaged in Level 2 activities at the same time that the workforce is trying to improve their processes, much opportunity and value will never be captured because barriers originating in the management system will prevent employees from successfully implementing process changes.

If management teams ARE involved in Level 2 work, **they should take pride in their contribution** to the dollars they add to the bottom line and in the success and sustainability of their program. Their employees will.

NOTE: Kay Sever implements continuous improvement with a unique and balanced approach between continuous improvement concepts/tools and the people side of improvement. She works with every organizational level and across functional areas to 1) remove the barriers that hide opportunity and prevent sustainability and culture change, and 2) promote cooperation and measurable improvement in all departments to maximize the natural synergies that exist between production and all the departments that support it. She also coaches management teams on Improvement Leadership and helps them modify their management processes to drive and sustain process improvements and improvement initiatives. More detail about her services is available at her website: miningopportunity.com. She resides in Arizona and can be reached at 480-545-9095 or via email: kay@miningopportunity.com.