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Continuous Improvement:
Mindsets, Capability, Process, Tools and Results

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Continuous Improvement

Just what is "*continuous improvement*?" Deming puts it simply as "improvement initiatives that increase successes and reduce failures". Others have defined continuous improvement as when individuals "take charge" of their education and improvement.

Another compelling definition states that continuous improvement is when individuals and natural work groups take time to continuously improve **_everyday_ - -** and continuous improvement occurs at a faster rate than that of the competition! An analogy might be the young violin student that becomes an accomplished professional through *daily practice* over several years. Thus, continuous improvement is *daily* improvement (with short term goals) aimed at long term improvement goals. It is a way of life, not just a one-time scheduled learning or change event.

Continuous improvement comes only from people - - people learning things *they* can learn, solving problems *they* can solve, implementing improvements *they* can implement.

Continuous improvement, however, *cannot* be defined as merely "ad hoc" project improvement teams that come together to fix a problem, or building new buildings, or asking for each other's opinion, or engaging in a programmatic event such as implementing Baldrige Quality Assessment Tools or engaging in *Six Sigma* process improvement. Of course, these things can be part of a continuous improvement environment or culture. However, because they are events with a separate life of their own, they can never truly define or represent a comprehensive and ongoing continuous improvement solution.

The sense of urgency for continuous improvement is at an all time high. Management and leadership disabilities, and dysfunctional organizational support systems are preventing many current and well-intentioned continuous improvement efforts in work places across the country to succeed. Are leaders appropriately equipped, skilled and experienced to successfully lead continuous improvement initiatives that will deliver the necessary results?

Successful Continuous Improvement Practices

Successfully practicing continuous improvement requires the cyclical application of several critical concepts that are strategically and appropriately sequenced as shown below. These concepts can be easily applied at an overall organizational level, a work team or departmental level, and even on an individual level!

Critical Success Factors

The above practices are simple, logical and proven. However, several factors are critical to the successful implementation of these practices:

- Leaders and stakeholders must develop continuous improvement mindsets and attitudes. This includes having the *courage* to always seek improvement, the *imagination* for "out of the box" improvement goals, perseverance and *patience* in dealing with the barriers and time it takes to change mindsets that change behaviors that bring lasting improvements, *and* last, but not least, the *passion* to achieve dramatic improvement and success.
- Improvement goals must encompass and include the whole organization. All people, departments and locations must be aligned and involved the discovery, design , implementation and sustaining of continuous improvement. In order for continuous improvement to become a defining attribute of the corporation's learning culture (i.e., continuous improvement as a way of life) involvement of all stakeholders is critical. Involvement breeds ownership. Ownership motivates committed (verses compliant) performance.
- Key leaders must be willing and able to provide the necessary support to meet improvement goals. Support must always be in balance with challenge.
- Key leaders must be willing to hold themselves and others accountable for achieving improvement goals.
- Stakeholder training and coaching to build internal capability is also critical to implementing a lasting continuous improvement culture. Internal capability enables an organization to improve faster that the competition!

Practices to Avoid

- *Threatening punitive action for non-improvement without first providing the support and training necessary for improvement.*
- *Improvement goals that are not properly balanced with support.*
- *Limiting improvement initiatives to only certain areas of the organization -* - continuous improvement must include every person, department, team and/or location. Every person should participate. Every person should work and perform with a continuous improvement *mindset.* Only then will continuous improvement become part of the organization's culture and performance environment.
- *Training for training's sake.* This is a waste of time and money. Training needs to be strategically aligned to improvement goals and initiatives. Also, it is important to evaluate the impact of training on the desired and intended outcomes, reward and recognize the positive impact, and continue to train to make more improvement where appropriate.
- *Raising standards to force improvement.* Increasing the challenge without providing the support needed to meet the challenge only frustrates and de-motivates all stakeholders involved.
- *Mandating solutions.* The probability of successfully implementing solutions without first collaboratively discovering root causes, and then carefully designing and testing solutions that are aimed at eliminating root causes, will be limited to only being lucky enough to hit on the right solution.

In summary, we must accept the fact that there are no continuous improvement "magic wands." Successfully implementing continuous improvement requires not only the challenge to improve, but also the necessary resources and environment to balance challenge with support. It requires the appropriate leadership mindsets and skills. It requires a proven and structured, yet flexible improvement process that allows for improvement readiness, awareness, involvement, strategic planning, design and implementation, supporting systems alignment, execution, accountability and appraisal. It requires skills and process training to build internal capability for managing and sustaining change and continuous improvement - - so improvement is a way of life, and not a memory. It requires stakeholder imagination, courage, patience, perseverance, commitment and passion.

For most, the path to a learning and working culture where continuous improvement is just something one does is a long and arduous journey. However, it is a journey with rewards that are well worth the investment and effort.

Is your organization ready and equipped to successfully implement *continuous* improvement? To help you find this out, complete the CI Readiness Assessment below. The data from this assessment may provide the impetus that puts your organization on the appropriate path to continuous improvement!

Assess Your Continuous Improvement Capability

Instructions: Use the continuous improvement system components list below to assess your school or school corporation's continuous improvement capability. Please the following rating scale to rate each component.

5=*Strongly Agree*; 4=*Agree*; 3=*Not sure*; 2=*Disagree*; 1=*Strongly Disagree*

Continuous Improvement Process Concepts	**Rating**
1. Key leaders accept that improvement is necessary.	
2. Key leaders have selected and employ a proven process for implementing continuous improvement	
3. We have and use the appropriate "tools" for implementing and sustaining continuous improvement.	
4. Leaders have engaged and are educating a guiding coalition of stakeholders to lead continuous improvement initiatives.	
5. Internal continuous improvement process practitioners are being trained and certified.	
6. Internal process practitioners are training all stakeholders.	
7. Key leaders and stakeholders have worked together to identify shared improvement goals, measures and values.	
8. Key leaders and stakeholders have worked together to identify what improvement projects are necessary to achieve their improvement goals.	
9. Key leaders have engaged key stakeholders in the design of improvement solutions.	
10. Stakeholders are leading the implementation of improvement solutions.	
11. Stakeholders appraise improvement results against their improvement goals.	
12. Victories are celebrated and rewarded.	
13. The continuous improvement process restarts with the mindset that improvement is always necessary.	
14. Every stakeholder takes time to improve *every day.*	
Number of "not sures": **Average Rating**	

Continuous Improvement Critical Success Factors	**Rating**
14. Leaders and stakeholders have mindsets and attitudes that are passionate about continuous improvement.	
15. Improvement initiatives and practices are encompassed by the whole organization.	
16. Key leaders provide the necessary support and training that is specifically aimed to meet improvement goals.	
17. Key leaders hold themselves and others accountable for achieving improvement goals.	
18. All stakeholders are involved in every aspect of the improvement process.	
19. Stakeholders are trained and have the necessary coaching to build the internal capability required for implementing a sustained continuous improvement culture.	
Number of "not sures": **Average Rating**	

Rating Summary

Component	Average Rating
Total number of "not sures" out of 19	
Process Concepts	
Critical Success Factors	
Overall Rating	

What are your continuous improvement strengths?

What are your continuous improvement opportunities?

What are your next steps toward improving your continuous improvement capabilities and probability for success?