

Creating an Organization-Wide Continuous Improvement Culture

Written by: Jim Wells

Want to improve your business situation? Regardless of the reasons why, a recognized need to improve the performance of your business is all that is needed to get the ball rolling. Once the decision is made, however, several questions immediately come to mind. Which approach? How do we start? How many people will this take? What do I expect to get from this? In my experience, it really does not matter which approach you chose. You can chose Six Sigma, Lean, Baldrige, ISO, PDCA, or any of the other latest fads in continuous improvement methods. With the right attitude and commitment, any of these approaches can be successful.

There are proponents of each of the previously mentioned methods, true believers in Six Sigma abound. Fervent advocates of lean are also out there in force. Many companies in the US have used the Baldrige criteria to improve and achieve excellence. ISO requirements for improvement have been ingrained since the standards were developed. Go to a conference and you will find all of these adherents out in force, preaching the gospel of their particular flavor of Continuous Improvement and telling anyone who will listen that THEIR flavor, can save the world and what the shortcomings of all of the other approaches are. So, which to choose? Answering this question starts with another question. What is your organizations culture and what are its big problems? If your organization is already highly disciplined and the perceived problems are with efficiency, lean may be the way to go. If you're organization is very entrepreneurial, with no appreciation for process discipline, maybe start with ISO or Baldrige requirements. If you're organization has a basic process discipline appreciation, but product quality issues are killing you, six sigma is for you. By the way, you don't have to choose just one method. The trend in recent years towards combined approaches (Lean Six Sigma) makes sense from the standpoint of wanting to get the most benefit possible.

Since which method is not the most important thing to consider, what is? There are two things that are of paramount importance to the success of a CI initiative; How committed are you, and what is the expected outcome? I cannot overstate the importance of top management commitment to the program. Commitment comes in many forms, starting with agreement all the way up to active participation. Real, meaningful management commitment is towards the top end of that spectrum, but don't worry, you don't have to do a Black Belt project to demonstrate commitment. What you do have to do though is this; Commit high potential resources, I mean really commit them. Take people out of their current roles and dedicate them to making this culture change happen. Do not take a half step here, don't create "Part-time" resources because part-time means no time. An important point here is the caliber of people that you commit to the effort. Don't choose the people that you can "afford" to do without in their current roles. If, while having the resource discussion, a persons' name comes up whom someone says they can't live without, that's the right person to put on the effort. This decision is a reflection back to managements' commitment. If the people chosen to lead the effort are viewed as expendable, the organization will recognize very quickly that management is not really

Compliant, Effective, Efficient.

www.pathwise.com

866.580.PATH

interested in this initiative and support will wither. The second thing to consider is what do you expect from the program? What's the big hairy goal that focuses the organizations efforts on this program? Is it winning awards from your customers, is it reducing cost by 50%, is it growing the business significantly? What motivates top management to be interested in this program and the results it achieves? Once you know this you're ready for the next phase.

Create a crisis. This statement is one way to say that you need to create a vision and a sense of urgency that everyone can easily recognize and understand, to make it easier for people to support and participate. So what is your crisis? Is it competition taking market share, customers firing you, significant product quality costs, significant overhead costs making you less competitive? Clearly define the crisis and communicate it broadly to the entire organization, repeatedly.

Once you have defined the vision, selected an approach or set of approaches to use, determined resources, and communicated the crisis, it time to get to work. Those resource decisions that you made earlier, its time to execute them. Actually take people from their old roles, reassign their old responsibilities to others, move them physically if possible. Now it's time to think about training.

Detailed Planning: There are a thousand little things to consider here. Many depend on what approach you settle on. Who will do your training? Will you certify your internal people? To what standard will they be certified? How will you communicate internally about progress and the program? How will you handle the negative backlash to change? What fears are most likely to rise up? All of these question will need to be addressed in a detailed way, pretty much up front. Some might wait until later, but if you imagine yourself as wildly successful, you will soon be faced with these issues, better to start thinking about them now.

Training: Depending on the program you've chosen, there are a wealth of resources out there to help accomplish this task. When engaging with someone to help you with training and even with program development, remember, you are in the drivers seat. Do your homework so you can engage the consultant and they can help you craft a program that meets your organizations needs, not theirs.

Execute, execute, execute: Once the detailed planning is drafted and the training is underway, its now time to execute. This is, by far, the most important part of any culture change activity. This is where credibility is built. This is the part where skeptics can become supporters and even passionate believers in what you do. The old saying "the proof is in the putting" is appropriate here. Early success is key to building credibility, so chose what problems to tackle wisely. Remember that you are dealing with high performing people but they have little to no experience with this new set of tools. Mistakes will be made, projects will fail, it happens so don't set someone up with a too complex problem as their first opportunity. At the same time, you want the problem to be real and easily recognizable by all as a problem worth fixing

Market your success: Once you start to have some solid success, start marketing. This part is underrated by

many (including me early on) but marketing the successes will help create momentum for the initiative. You'll be able to recognize when you have momentum when you no longer have to recruit people into the initiative, but they seek you out to lobby you to allow them to participate. How to market depends on the company culture. I've used "Six Sigma Fairs", project presentations, billboard and email announcements, and testimonials to varying degrees of success. Try lots of things and stick to what you find works.

Promote the right behaviors: One of the most important things to consider upfront is how you will feed the beast in the future. Most CI Initiatives require some intentional turnover to be viewed as beneficial and viable. The challenge here is what to do with the people that have the new skills required to be effective CI leaders. The best thing to do is promote them into positions of leadership. If the program is truly valuable to the company, those skills will be valued in leadership roles as well. There is an added benefit of showing the organization how important the initiative is to the company's success, and that participation is a possible path to promotion.

Finally, once momentum has started to build, keep it going. Culture change takes a long time, the more radical the change, the more difficult it will be to sustain. Keep at it, building on each success and failure to improve and add more momentum. Only when you have enough leaders who manage their functions using the CI method, will the initiative start to sustain itself.

About the Author

James Wells has been a Quality Professional for over 12 years, implementing Quality Management Systems compliant with ISO 9001, ISO 14001, TS16949, and FDA cGMP requirements, and Lean Six Sigma Continuous Improvement Systems that have delivered \$36 million in savings and over 90% reduction in defects. Mr. Wells is certified by the American Society for Quality as a Certified Manager of Quality/Organizational Excellence, certified as a Six Sigma Master Black Belt, and certified as a Lean Specialist. Mr. Wells can be reached through Linked-In at: <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/james-wells/1/14b/673>, at Qualitypractice.blogspot.com, or via email at: qualityinpractice@gmail.com