



How to Embed a Culture of Continuous Improvement in Your Organisation

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
EMPOWERING THE FRONT LINE THROUGH CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT.....	4
WHY ARE COMPANIES AFRAID TO OBTAIN FEEDBACK FROM THEIR STAFF?.....	7
WHY DO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES FAIL?.....	10
BE CREATIVE IN REWARDING YOUR STAFF.....	12
IF YOU DON'T COMMUNICATE YOU WILL FAIL.....	15
SHARE YOUR VISION AND DIRECTION FOR THE COMPANY.....	18
MEASURE AND IT GETS DONE.....	20
MAKE EVERYTHING VISUAL FOR ALL TO SEE AND LEARN.....	22
WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?.....	25
EMPOWER YOUR STAFF THROUGH CONTINUOUS LEARNING.....	28
ABOUT LEADING EDGE GROUP.....	31

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO EMBED A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN YOUR ORGANISATION

We exist in a time where change is both inevitable and rapid. Keeping up with the rapidly changing world means employees need to learn continuously if they are to meet business objectives. To have a competent and agile workforce, it is essential for organizations to empower, encourage, motivate and invest in the development of its employees.

Organizations can kickstart continuous improvement (CI) initiatives by establishing a culture that drives out fear, promotes on the job training, education and is inclusive.

This eBook provides a roadmap on how to embed a culture of continuous improvement, so it becomes the organization's DNA:

- Build a strong and positive organisational culture
- Share the organization's vision with staff
- Reward, appreciate and recognize staff equally and creatively
- Communicate clearly and engage staff
- Use visual management to aid employee understanding and learning
- Empower staff through continuous learning
- Measure critical data, to determine baseline for improvement initiatives
- Maintain feedback loops to foster employment engagement

Most CI projects launch with enthusiasm and even show great progress. However, they quickly fizzle out due to lack of stakeholder support, ambiguous goals, and insufficient communication. To sustain CI initiatives, project outcomes must be relevant to stakeholders to keep them engaged, inspired and energized.

EMPOWERING THE FRONT LINE THROUGH CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT



Most organizations depend heavily on the human factor. Hospitals for example employ Frontline workers who provide routine and essential services such as food services, administration, housekeeping and out-patient care, Front line workers constitute 50 percent of the health care workforce, making them a key part of the health care system. It's not only hospitals who employ front line workers, manufacturing and service based companies do too. For this reason, frontline workers form an organization's backbone and are the vehicle to meeting customer needs. Thus, to build a successful organization management and/or owners

must empower, encourage, motivate and involve their front-line workers in their continuous improvement programs. After all, front line workers are the ones doing the work every day thus they know a company's processes better than anyone.

So, what steps should a company take to build a culture that empowers its Front line?

1. Drive out Fear

The organization should allow its employees to perform at their best by ensuring that they are not afraid to express ideas or concerns. It should be made clear to everyone that the goal is to achieve high quality by doing more of the right things not just doing things right and that the organization is not interested in blaming people when mistakes happen. After all people work in the system management created thus the system should be blamed not the people. Managers should also take it upon themselves to make employee feel valued, to be authentic and also approachable.

2. Use Training on the Job

Every organization needs to have standard procedures; this can help reduce inconsistencies and variation. Once employees are trained on a certain procedure and master it, it becomes very easy to maintain consistency. Allow employees to understand their roles in the "big picture. "Employees are not always motivated by financial rewards; employee recognition and sense of belonging are some of the aspects that motivate employees. Making employees understand how their roles contribute to the overall success of the company is essential and often motivates employees to participate in the organization's continuous improvement programs. It is also Management's responsibility to encourage staff to learn from one another, and provide a culture and environment for effective teamwork. Every employee has strengths and weaknesses; this is one good reason why there should be effective teamwork in every orga-

nization. It promotes growth as employees can learn from each other's strengths. An organization that promotes a learning culture will benefit from continuous improvement as every employee will gain more skills leading to organizational success.

3. Implement Education and Self-improvement

It is important to promote a learning culture in an organization as it not only improves the current skills of the employees but also prepares them for future changes and challenges. Thus, the workforce becomes agile and is better able to identify areas with room for improvement.

To effectively transform the front line, management must be committed, approachable and open minded. Management should eliminate fear to increase trust, use on the job training to bolster employee skillset, and include the front line employees in the transformation process to increase their involvement in continuous improvement projects. As a result, the organization will benefit tremendously as it will have a motivated, satisfied and competent workforce.

WHY ARE COMPANIES AFRAID TO OBTAIN FEEDBACK FROM THEIR STAFF?



In this context, feedback is the helpful information or criticism sent to the organization by its employees about its prior actions or behavior so that the organization may adjust its current and future actions and behaviors to achieve desired results.

Why are Companies afraid of Feedback?

1. Fear of not Meeting Expectations

Organizations are afraid to obtain feedback as they might not have enough resources to fulfill the employee requests. Lack of money, equipment and other resources can put a company in a tight position where it's reluctant to seek feedback from its employees as it won't be in the best position to meet its employees' expectations.

2. Fear of Bad Rapport

There are employees who are assertive enough to discuss freely anything happening in the organization with any interested party, regardless of the effect of this to the organization's image. The involved employees view this behavior as a sign of boldness whereas most organizations view this as irresponsible and reckless, for that reason organizations are afraid of seeking feedback from their employees for fear of being exposed. Thus, making them reluctant to seek feedback in a quest to protect the organization's rapport. After all, no publicity is better than bad publicity.

3. Fear of Culture Change

It takes a lot of time and effort to build a strong and positive organizational culture. Thus, organizations are afraid of feedback as it might mean leaving their comfort zone (known and comfortable ways) for the unknown, promising and potentially uncomfortable future.

Why Feedback is Important

It can motivate employees to perform better as employees feel valued and appreciated when they are asked to provide input to make the organization better. In turn organizations are motivated to provide resources and environment to nurture their employees. Feedback is also important because it improves employee engagement due to the involvement of employees in improvement initiatives. This results in a workforce that is knowledgeable, confident and empowered. Feedback is one of the most effective ways to foster a culture of continuous learning in an organization. This is so because it challenges organizations to periodically assess their goal, strategies, workforce and relationships thus leaving room for improvement.

How Companies Can Request Feedback

Organizations can seek ways to improve their operation by engaging their employees through the following methods;

- 1. Performance Appraisals**
- 2. Question and Answer Sessions**
- 3. Anonymous Portals**
- 4. Employee Survey**

WHY DO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES FAIL?



Continuous Improvement (CI) often known as Kaizen is an ongoing effort to improve products, services, processes and way of working. The improvement(s) can either be incremental over time or a one-time breakthrough. Most CI projects launch with enthusiasm and even show great progress. However, they quickly fizzle out.

The following outlines some of the key reasons why CI initiatives fail:

1. Lack of Stakeholder Support

So many stakeholders need to be engaged for CI initiatives to be a success. Often there is lack or inadequate support from senior stakeholders thus limiting the resources needed to start and/or sustain the CI initiatives. Lack of support from middle management results in ambiguity for employees thus preventing them from carrying out CI initiatives properly.

Last but not least, lack of engagement from front line employees' due to lack of clarity and enthusiasm results in them not adopting the change thus leading to failure of the CI initiatives.

2. Relevance not Clear

When people do not see how CI initiatives are relevant to their daily work it makes it hard for them to fully buy in. The confusion employees have as to why change is necessary results in CI initiatives failing. This is why it is of utmost importance for organizations to inspire their employees, make the changes relevant and show how the CI initiatives will enhance working experience. After all, why should employees commit to CI initiatives when they don't understand how they are relevant to their work and the organization as a whole?

3. Insufficient Communication

Continuous Improvement initiatives involve a change in how people think and do their work. For that reason, it is impossible to have any improvement(s) without change. As a result of the changes, many processes are affected, altering job routines and the operating procedures. To ensure success, it is important to not only give out information but to get through to the affected parties. Most times unclear and/or little information about the new changes is shared to the bottom line, resulting in lack of clarity ultimately leading to failure.

To sustain CI initiatives, the project outcome has to be relevant to the stakeholders to keep them engaged, inspired and energized. New changes have to be communicated sufficiently by discarding obsolete forms and updating procedures. This turns off any old systems so people cannot revert to the "old way" thus making "New" the routine.

BE CREATIVE IN REWARDING YOUR STAFF



A great employee reward system can improve engagement and keep staff focused on what matters most. However, the reward system has to be comprehensive enough to incorporate recognition and appreciation (not necessarily financial reward!). To be effective the reward system has to be aligned with the organization's goals. It is important to recognize, appreciate and reward employees as that results in them feeling valued. Employees who feel valued and appreciated are generally happier, embrace the work on hand and contribute more to the organization. This results in a constantly improving organization.

Ways to Reward Your Staff

1. Praise

It is one of the simplest yet most meaningful way to acknowledge your staff. An in-person conversation or thank you note showing how much

you appreciate an employee's effort will increase your employee happiness and keep them engaged in CI initiatives.

2. Public Recognition

Publicly recognizing staff for exceptional contributions to the organization is an effective way to show your appreciation for their work. It sends a message to the rest of the team that the organization values, recognizes and is willing to reward great work. This encourages people to come forward with their ideas thus fostering a continuous improvement culture in the workplace.

3. Responsibility

You can assign important tasks to your staff and empower them to make high level decisions on their own. This shows the staff that you are confident in their abilities and that they have potential to take on more challenging roles and grow in the organization. This signals to the rest of the team the organization's intent to continuously improve its staff's competency.

4. Flexibility

Granting your staff, the option to take a day off each month whenever they reach their goals ahead of time creates an ideal work and life balance for them. This results in well rested and motivated employees who are willing to take on more challenges and even participate in Continuous Improvement initiatives. After all, what kind of employee would not be compelled to the betterment of an organization that appreciates him or her.

5. Awards

Conducting an awards ceremony to acknowledge contributors and celebrate the improvements reflects the value the organization places in teamwork. Thus, promoting a collaborative culture of Continuous Improvement.



Organizations who take time to recognize, appreciate and reward their staff always enjoy the benefit of engaged, responsible, proactive and committed employees. Employees are more than willing to contribute to organizations that value them.

IF YOU DON'T COMMUNICATE YOU WILL FAIL



What is Workplace Communication?

"It is the transmitting of information between one person or group and another person or group in the organization." There are two forms of communication in an organization, upward and downward communication. Upward communication is the flow up of information from an employee to a superior whereas downward communication is the flow down of information from a superior to an employee.

Workplace Communication is important to organizations because it ensures everyone is on the same page thus increasing clarity and productivity.

Why Lack of Communication Leads to Organizational Failure

1. Uncertainty

Lack of communication in an organization creates uncertainty as employees won't be aware of business goals and objectives thus resulting in some goals not being met on time, leading to organizational failure.

2. Poor Teamwork

Most organizations rely heavily on teams to meet their objectives. However, if there is no communication between team members there might be ambiguity with regards to goals and responsibilities of the team members. This might create conflict and confusion, leading to the organization not completing certain tasks on time and meeting its objectives.

3. Snowball Effect in Worker Actions

Lack of communication at work e.g. managers not taking time to address employee concerns and not listening to employee suggestions can result in resentment, leading to employees talking to each other about their concerns. If one employee quits, usually many more will follow suit due to shared thoughts about management and the company

How to Improve Workplace Communication

Workplace Communication can improve and lead to organizational success if managers make an effort to listen to, inform and educate employees on corporate news, events and problems. Managers also need to empower employees to ask questions, suggest solutions and offer different points of views. This improves the flow of information between employees and management thus increasing clarity and productivity in the organization. Use of various communication tools e.g. email, text, in

person meetings and posters also caters for different types of employees thus improving their understanding and in turn productivity. Most importantly communication fosters a continuous learning culture.

Benefits of Workplace Communication

Workplace communication allows flow of information between management and employees. This makes employees engaged, feel acknowledged and appreciated, motivating them to work better thus resulting in an increase in productivity. Employees also feel empowered when their concerns and suggestions are heard and acted upon thus leading to job satisfaction, good attendance records and low turnover.

SHARE YOUR VISION AND DIRECTION FOR THE COMPANY

As a business leader, it is your responsibility to develop long-term goals that foster a culture of continuous improvement and growth. Once the goals are in place, articulate to your staff the direction you plan on taking the organization and how you plan on doing that. This journey you plan on embarking and how you plan to do that (Organization's Vision) has to be easy enough to follow, clear to understand and inspiring enough for all your staff to buy in.

How to Develop a Vision for Your Company

1. Figure Out Your Purpose

First you have to define the sole purpose of your company's existence. This is not just observable deliverables of your organization. It is a bold affirmation of what the organization stands for.

2. Establish A Direction

Then you need to establish a direction that involves figuring out where your organization is heading to and how soon it wants to get there.

3. Create A Vision Statement

You have to show your staff how you plan on arriving at your destination. The best way to do this is by formulating a short, clear, inspiring and memorable Vision Statement that is aligned with the organization's values, and motivates staff.

4. Share the Vision

To ensure everyone is on the same page, you have to engage staff by telling them how the organization's vision is aligned with their roles and also communicate your long-term plans for the business with enthusiasm.



Why Having a Vision is Important?

It is important for an organization to have a vision as that brings clarity to all the staff on where the organization is, where it is planning to go and how it will get there. A vision keeps staff engaged, motivated and aligned with the company's values. However, absence of a vision makes staff confused, dis-engaged, demotivated and misaligned with the company's values, ultimately leading to organization failure. To achieve long-term goals an organization has to foster a continuous improvement culture. This means the organization has to go through change, letting go of the old systems and embracing the new. Change triggers some form of resistance from staff as they will have to leave their comfort zone. However, if you have an inspiring vision that staff can resonate with enough to visualize a new and better future, they will stay engaged even though they might be hurting from leaving their comfort zones.

MEASURE AND IT GETS DONE



What gets measured gets done because you are paying attention to it and gathering information you need to achieve your goal. The information you collect helps you understand the current state of the process, making it easier for you to make decisions to improve it. When you measure, it is important to measure only what is aligned with your business priorities (key metrics) as, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

Why Measure?

It is important to measure critical data (key metrics) and to measure it correctly. Once you understand your current state you will be better positioned to enhance organizational performance. More so, you can't optimize what you don't measure. Thus, it is important to measure critical data, essential information that serves as a baseline for improvement

initiatives. Measuring also gives you a true picture of current performance levels, giving you an opportunity to learn from both failures and successes and embark on a continuous improvement journey.

Key Metrics

1. Quality

This is a key metric whether your organization is service or product based. Measurement of the quality of your deliverable is important as it reflects the effectiveness of your systems, processes and/or equipment. If the quality of your service is poor it means you have to improve your method of delivery and if your product is of bad quality it means your equipment is not working at an optimal level, leaving room for improvement.

2. Time

Reducing the amount of time needed to create a product or deliver a service is essential to saving an organization time and money. Thus, measuring time taken to complete tasks is an effective way to determine the throughput of a process and how that impacts the budget.

3. Finance

This metric determines whether your effort is amounting to positive financial returns or not. Most businesses are profit based and measure their success by how much profits they make. Thus, it is essential for an organization to measure the return of its investment from time to time to ensure it is meeting one of its key goals, profitability. A low return of investment is a sign that the organization performance is subpar and could benefit from continuous improvement initiatives.

4. Employee Feedback

Providing feedback to an employee without ways to track progress does not yield results. To effect improvement, the organization has to provide feedback and measure change.



MAKE EVERYTHING VISUAL FOR ALL TO SEE AND LEARN



What is Visual Management?

It is the use of visual aids (displays, metrics and controls) to make operational standards visible. This enhances understanding of information being communicated to the staff thus making it easy for them to follow instructions, meet organizational objectives and contribute to organizational success.

Types of Visual Management

1. Visual Displays

These are labels such as floor safety markings which help identify where products and equipment belong in the workplace. Another type of visual display is standard operating procedures placed on work stations to guide personnel working in that area.

2. Visual Metrics

These are visual standards of measurement such as graphs and charts that facilitate communication and identification of areas that need improvement in the workplace

3. Visual Controls

There are 3 major types of visual controls, Gauges which give information, Indicators which show the status of a process or machine and Guides which instruct us what to do. This makes it easier to identify out of standard situations from a distance.

Why Visual Management

In order for your operations to be efficient your staff needs to understand the key goals and targets at all times. That is why visual management is important. It communicates information quickly, clearly and in real time. This ensures staff gets the information they need when they need it, allowing them to meet their goals in a timely manner, leading to organizational success.

Visual management also builds participation through shared information thus fostering a culture of oneness and learning in the organization. One of the main advantages of visual management is that it is part of the flow of the process thus improving employee engagement as employees have to deal with abnormalities in real time to keep the process going. It

is important to note that not all visual management tools are the same, the best ones are the one that not only reflect problems but also instruct employees what to do next thus reducing down time.

The most important benefit of visual management in the workplace is that it shows things that need attention in real time which reduces delays in the process thus maintaining efficiency.

WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?



Organizational culture is the sum of the systems, processes, values, beliefs and behavior of the organization. In short, it is the way things are done in the organization and the way its employees behave. The culture of an organization is also its DNA, an element complex enough to both control and define the organization's identity. Organizational culture can be likened to an iceberg as it has both observable and invisible elements as explained below.

Observable Elements

1. These are the things that you get to know about an organization through observation such as signs, symbols and dress code.

2. These are things you can read or hear about an organization such as its mission, vision, core values, quality, philosophies and standard operating procedures.

Invisible Element

Though usually taken for granted, this is the foundation and shaping force of the organization, things that you can't see but can experience e.g. Leadership styles, employee engagement, work environment and relationships with customers.

To develop a positive culture an organization has to do the following;

- Be flexible
- Listen to the voice of its customers, both internal and external
- Promote open communication
- Promote synergy between teams to build strong teams and networks
- Trust, respect and empower its employees
- Embrace change
- Treat failure as a learning opportunity

To sustain the positive culture an organization has to define its values.

This brings clarity, thus making the decision-making process easy. After defining its values an organization has to hire based on its value which means hiring based on culture fit first followed by skill fit. Finally, the organization has to 'live its values', which means nurturing its high-level performers who are compliant with their values, coaching low level performers who are values compliant and pruning both low level and high-level performers who are not compliant with the organization's value system.

One of the determining factors of a strong and positive culture is how employees relate to each other and how each employee is aligned to the organization's values.

To ensure that employees can both relate to each other and be aligned to the organization's values they have to learn the culture. The organization can facilitate this through coaching sessions, designing rituals, storytelling and eliminating language barriers through training and translation. A strong culture starts with a competent employee as the strength of the employee is in the organization's culture and the organization's strength is in the employee.

EMPOWER YOUR STAFF THROUGH CONTINUOUS LEARNING



We exist in a time where the pace of change is faster than before. Keeping up with the rapidly changing world means employees need to learn continuously if they are to fulfil their roles and business objectives successfully. Thus, to have a competent and agile workforce, it is essential for organizations to empower, encourage, motivate and invest in continuous learning of its employees.

What is Empowerment?

It is a continual process of ensuring staff has resources, expertise, motivation and are in a conducive environment to fulfil their responsibilities and meet organizational goals. It is also important to note that empowerment unlike micromanaging involves trusting and enabling your staff to think, act and be in control of the work they do.

How to Empower Staff

The most effective way to empower staff is by coaching them to your desired level of competence. Thus, it is an organization's responsibility to create a culture of continuous learning. How can an organization do this? By identifying opportunities to support its staff to learn from what they do (their experiences), what they are about to do (their intentions), what others have done (history) and what competitors are doing well (standard work).

So, what steps should an organization take to empower its staff through continuous learning?

1. Educate

Coach staff on not only acquiring knowledge but reflecting on their learnings and sharing them.

2. Train

Develop robust training to impart knowledge, problem solving skills and increase confidence of your staff. You can do this by either hiring an external expert or by using the services of an in house certified continuous improvement expert. Ideally you want to train all employees from Yellow Belt training for front line staff, Green and Black Belt training for middle management and Master Black Belt training for senior management. Training your staff makes them accountable, responsible, competent and feel valued, thus fostering a culture of continuous improvement within your organization.

3. Involve

To ensure staff are well informed, conduct daily huddle meetings which are open to all, short and detailed enough to save time whilst discussing challenges within their own area and actions to remedy same with ac-

countabilities. Delegating responsibilities e.g. decision making and leading continuous improvement projects is a great way to empower your staff. This will result in them feeling like they are an integral part of the team and increase their motivation thus challenging them to contribute more.

ABOUT LEADING EDGE GROUP

Leading Edge Group is a global leader in continuous improvement consultancy and corporate training and education. Established in Cork, Ireland in 1995, we have continued to grow and expand for the past two decades and now have operations in Canada, Australia, and the Middle East. We have more than 20 years of international experience and have worked with the best of the best across a broad range of sectors. We have honed our skills and expertise to ensure that when you engage us, you are giving your organisation the optimum opportunity to develop, grow and realise its true potential.

For further information about Leading Edge Group:

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