

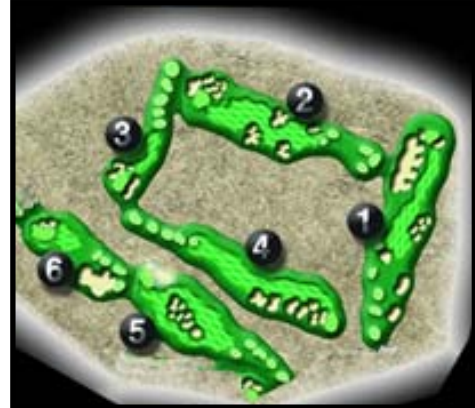
Avoiding “Sand Traps”

By Sheila Julien

To get and stay ahead of the competition, it is all about how to improve further and faster. That’s what our methodology *The Right Way to Manage*® is all about. But sometimes, despite the best intentions, an improvement effort can get bogged down.

In fact, people often tell us that they have trouble keeping their improvement efforts on track and, consequently, are unable to achieve results within reasonable or expected time-frames. In other words, they can’t improve fast enough to stay ahead of competitive or operational challenges.

While there can be a number of reasons for delays and the related under-achievement — such as failing to identify root causes, as outlined in one of our [recent newsletters](#) — we have identified six common pitfalls or “sand traps” that every improvement leader should avoid. Here’s a list of the sand traps and some ideas on how you might avoid them:



PACE

The most common cause of delay in achieving results is the pace. Some teams schedule an hour a week to work on the project, so that under the *best* of circumstances, two months will pass before the project gets one day’s attention. But far more often it will take three or four months to complete one day’s effort on the project because meetings get cancelled, or start late, and then a portion of each meeting is spent going over the status or covering old ground for a member who missed a meeting. When a project progresses this slowly, priorities may change or resources are reassigned without ever completing the work and gaining the improvements.

Sometimes these teams feel like they’ve got ‘analysis paralysis’, but in fact very little analysis has been completed. The real culprit is really ‘pace paralysis’. Bear in mind that the longer the project length, the more project overhead and rework time is expended and the lower the benefit (because every week of delay means a week of benefit is lost).

The secret to avoiding this trap is, to the fullest extent possible, employ the Kaizen approach. A Kaizen requires planning and data gathering up front and then all the necessary people are pulled off their jobs for one day or several days to completely solve the problem: designing, testing, stabilizing solutions usually in under a week. The Kaizen approach requires good planning on the part of the leaders and facilitator, but makes good use of the entire team’s time while accelerating the benefits of the improvement effort.



SCOPE



The second most common trap that slows down progress is a poorly designed project scope. The scope may start out too large — trying to take on all locations, departments, functions, product lines, etc. all at once. When the scope is too large, you have too many aspects of the problem to track down, analyze, and address, and too many people to consult, inform, and persuade. A team's progress can also be inhibited if too much of the scope falls beyond their sphere of control. For example, if a receiving team wants to address a Purchasing process or a Manufacturing team wants to address an Order Entry process — a situation that arises when the work in one department causes rework in another. Sometimes a project begins with the intention of being short and sweet, but gradually the scope keeps growing until the project is in danger of crumbling under its own weight.

Avoid the scope-trap by explicitly raising and resolving as many questions about scope as possible. Define the scope so that improvement results can be realized as quickly as possible. Decide what locations, functions, departments are in scope by identifying the one or two that will provide the biggest impact (you can do this by stratifying the data you used to quantify the opportunity). Decide what types of problems are out of scope. You may decide that systems design issues should be out-of-scope if the organization already has a multi-year waiting list for systems changes. An area that is slated for major change in the near future often should be deemed out-of-scope. Be clear about the expected project deliverable. Sometimes improvements can be implemented, verified, stabilized. In other situations, the project team may be chartered to merely gather, analyze, and report data about the problem.

THE INCOMMUNICADO IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Sometimes delays are caused by insufficient communication. When a team leader does not communicate regularly with the sponsor, many delays can crop up: the team leader misses out on useful information that the sponsor has on the topic; a team struggles with obstacles that the sponsor can move out of the way; a team becomes set on a solution that the sponsor feels is untenable or does not understand well enough to give it full support. Many things can go awry when the team and the sponsor are out of touch.

This sand trap is easy to avoid by discussing these risks up front with the sponsor and agreeing how frequently to communicate about the project. The frequency really depends on the speed of the projects. If you are executing a Kaizen, you should communicate in advance and update the sponsor at the end of every day. If your improvement team is meeting an hour a week, perhaps too little happens to merit a weekly update, but a team leader should not go more than three weeks without updating the sponsor. Agree on the update schedule and put it in your calendars for the expected duration of the project.



"TWO-FIVING"

It often seems like a really nifty shortcut to proceed directly from **Define the Problem** (step 2 in the 8-step methodology) to "**Implement the Solution**" (step 5), but a lot of time and effort can be wasted implementing the wrong solution. Over 90% of projects are launched with some solution in mind. But then, through the course of studying the problem from a number of angles, more than two-thirds will identify much better, quicker and/or more durable solutions. It is wonderful to start out with some theories about the likely causes of the problem. But while a hunch makes a good servant, it is a very poor master! Don't skip to implementation. Instead use your hunches to help you prioritize what data to collect and analyze. When you get into the data and the detail, you may learn that the real cause is something quite unexpected. "Two Fiving" is the fastest way to implement the *wrong* solution!

ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

Sometimes a team gets stuck in genuine analysis paralysis, gathering buckets of data and generating lots of charts without uncovering any real clues as to how to solve the problem. The team can make better choices about what analysis should be done with this simple analysis planning methodology:

- a) Brainstorm lots of questions about the problem or process that will help you better understand it. Types of questions may include: how does the process actually work today? How big is the problem? Is it getting better or worse? Is it cyclical? What aspect (i.e. what type, customer, material, machine, operator, etc.) is most frequent? Or represents the most cost? What point of the process causes the biggest delays? Where does the process provide the greatest opportunities for error or delays? Ask all the questions you can think of that might shed light on the problem or opportunity.
- b) Evaluate those questions to eliminate those that are impossible to answer and prioritize the few that seem most likely to provide useful information or clues in a less time.
- c) Perform the analysis selected.
- d) Carefully review the results to get all the information possible out of it, and write your observations and conclusions about that chart directly below the chart. A process flow may show you where the bottlenecks and opportunities for error are, as well as how many steps and how much time is required. A Pareto chart tells you not only which is the most frequent, but how significant that is, that is whether the problem really seems focused around one or two contributors (if the 80/20 rule applies) or whether the



problem seems fairly common regardless of which operator, customer, machine, shift, etc. is involved.

- e) Then, having gathered as much from each chart as possible, identify what, if any, additional questions the chart raises. For example, if your Pareto chart shows that most of the defects were produced on a certain machine, you might want to drill down into that machine's data for more information such as: do the defects appear disproportionately on some products? What types of defects does that machine produce? What can you learn by observing how that machine operates?
- f) Repeat the cycle, choosing the next best question either from your original list or from the additional questions you generated from the analysis.

Making better choices as to what questions to answer and selecting the best tool for the question will enable you to get to the heart of the problem faster.

ONE-TRACK THINKING

One-track thinking about possible solutions can delay results. When the first idea for a solution involves a long development or implementation time, brainstorm other ways of chipping away at the problem. I have worked with a number of project teams that, when pressed, were able to identify and implement partial but quick solutions to eliminate 50-90% of the problem when the first "perfect solution" would have taken a year or more. Don't let the perfect become the enemy of the good.

We have some tools available that may help you avoid some of these "sand traps." Call or email our office to learn more about Conway Management Company's **"8-step Methodology Project Management Template"** that not only captures the key project information in one handy Word file, but also helps you avoid "Two-Fiving" and scope creep. The template provides a space in "Step 8" for the team to capture out-of-scope opportunities that can be addressed in the next project once the initial scope has been completed.

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Conway Management Company provides consulting, education and training to enable people at all levels to work more effectively. Established in 1983 by Bill Conway, former CEO of a Fortune 500 Company, Conway Management has worked with hundreds of organizations in diverse industries such as nuclear power, supermarkets, oil and gas, local, state and federal government, food manufacturing, distribution, and more. Clients learn to eliminate waste, improve all processes and increase their organization's competitiveness, sales and profits.

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