



In Improvement as in many things, speed to results matters.

Without tangible, measurable benefits, enthusiasm wanes and malaise creeps in. And the longer something takes, the more expensive it becomes. While not everything is, can be or should be a Quick Win, organizations need enough of them to sustain their efforts.

Mary Jane Conway-King

Quick Wins

by: Sheila Julien, Senior Associate

When it comes to Continuous Process Improvement, action is what it's all about. It matters not a bit what training you provide, slogans you use, or posters you post if you do not promptly move into action to get things done, measured, and stabilized so the solution sticks. 'Quick Wins' is a powerful tool for moving teams into action. But it is more easily said than done. In this newsletter, we'll discuss Quick Wins, why they matter, what can go wrong, and how to increase the chances of success.

What Is A 'Quick Win'?

The key elements are right there in those two words: it's got to be quick and it's got to be successful. A Quick Win must be completed in 4 to 6 weeks at most, but many are implemented much faster such as in a "kaizen blitz" where a small group focuses full time on an improvement for a day or two, or half-time for a week.

Because of the speed imperative, if a solution requires a significant capital investment, it is not going to be a Quick Win. If it requires a large team or cross-functional buy-in, chances are it will be a slow win if it succeeds at all. Many Quick Wins do not require a formal team; often a natural work team can identify the problem and implement a quick solution. For a solution to become a Quick Win it is almost always an improvement that can be completed with the people closest to the work and with the resources close at hand.

Sometimes a Quick Win is a high value improvement executed with speed. But even an improvement with small dollar impact can have a great ROI – because the time and expense invested is so low and the organization begins reaping the benefits so quickly.

Why Do They Matter?

According to John Kotter, author of [*Leading Change and The Heart of Change*](#), creating Quick Wins builds momentum, defuses cynics, enlightens pessimists, and energizes people.

Education, promptly followed by action, yields motivation. Success inspires success. Theoretical opportunities and methodologies are meaningless until a person starts to see the possibilities through real-life hands-on process improvement. So a Quick Win is a shot of adrenalin for a Continuous Improvement culture. The people involved get a great deal of satisfaction from making the work more effective, more efficient, or lower cost. Their effort pays off, and pays off quickly. They are more inclined to look for another such improvement. The people who see or hear about the Quick Win are often inspired to begin looking for their own Quick Wins. So the motivational value of a Quick Win makes the return on the effort even higher.



But there's more. **A Quick Win starts paying off sooner and this can have a huge impact on the total return from the improvement.** Every improvement eventually becomes obsolete, as needs change and new options emerge. If a project that yields benefits equating to \$1,000 each week is implemented in two weeks, it provides benefits for the remaining 50 weeks of the year. If it takes 22 weeks to implement, it has 20 fewer weeks of payoff, equating to an opportunity cost of \$20,000.

Furthermore, enthusiasm and focus tend to dissipate as time wears on. People get distracted, scopes creep, priorities change, and resources get redeployed. The shorter the time between start and completion, the less time people spend in meetings, trying to recall where they left off and who said they would do what, and writing up minutes and status reports. The longer the project, the more likely the team is to lose members or be disbanded before completion – when that happens, the work they completed may go completely to waste. In contrast, a two-day kaizen blitz has very little overhead and is almost always completed before the team is disbursed.

So Quick Wins are essential to morale and motivation, especially as people are just starting to learn about and internalize Continuous Process Improvement or when interest is flagging. They produce results for longer periods, and they have less overhead and risk of write-off. In short – Quick Wins are an indispensable tool for any continuously improving organization!

Risks of Quick Wins

But going after Quick Wins is not a sure fire strategy. Without effective leadership, an organization may end up with quick failures instead. Here are some of the potential pitfalls of Quick Wins:

To get a solution implemented quickly a team might skip over the analysis. This is fine in situations where it is easy to quickly determine if the solution worked. If trying the solution is cheap, and it is quick and easy to determine if it solved the problem, just do it! In such a situation, measuring the results is all the analysis you need. But if the results are not likely to be quickly visible or measurable, it is better to do more analysis up front to make sure that the solution you want to implement will actually yield improvements. For example, if an organization is concerned about employee morale, there are many quick changes that could be made in hopes to improve morale. But organizational morale cannot be measured daily or even weekly. It could take many months to know if a change was actually for the better. In a situation like this, more analysis up front is essential to choosing the right solution.

Sometimes, when you aim for speed, you get a rush to judgement resulting in sub-optimization. The first idea is the only idea, when a more thoughtful consideration of the alternatives would surface a substantially better solution. An organization may simply resort to a band-aid or patch or work-around rather than a solution that addresses a root cause. These band-aides can accumulate until they represent a pretty big component of waste in themselves.

**Don't let the first idea
be the only idea...**

Often a Quick Win is really just an idea someone has “on the shelf” – that is an idea they have been carrying around for a while. When an organization is introduced to Continuous Improvement, a flood of these ideas may be surfaced. But an off-the-shelf idea doesn't provide a real “cycle of learning” in systematic process improvement because eventually people run out of ideas “on the shelf”. Unless an organization really internalizes the search for waste, the study of facts and data, the search for root causes, and the testing then standardization of the solution, they don't know how to keep improving once these “on the shelf” ideas get used up.

Speed, however, does not necessarily mean a team must take short cuts in the process improvement methodology. Thoughtful exploration of alternatives can be bounded by time. Even 30 minutes of brainstorming alternatives or improvements to an idea can make a difference. Allowing 24 hours for feedback and improvements on the idea can identify ways to make it even better – with minimal impact



on speed. With focus, it is possible to move through steps 1 through 5 of the [Conway 8 Step Process Improvement Methodology](#) in less than a day.

Keys To Successful Quick Wins

Keep the following ideas in mind to get the most out of Quick Wins.

Don't Let the Perfect Be the Enemy of the Good.

Often an organization has a problem for which the perfect technology solution is known – it is just not available, either because of the cost or because it is still under development. Ask “what else?” What are the other ways the problem can be solved? It is often difficult to think of a Plan B, when there is a big, gleaming, perfect, obvious solution – that is simply not available now. The temptation is to set aside the problem as something you need to live with – but there may be other solutions not quite as good but that at least capture 50%, 60%, 80% of the benefit that the best solution could provide.

For example, one large organization had a problem with re-billing their substantial FedEx charges to the correct client. An employee in the Billing Department spent 30 hours a week on this one billing task. FedEx had a technology solution that would solve the problem, but it would not be available for at least nine months. So, determined not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good, they decided to focus on what they could do TODAY to at least reduce this waste. They figured out that there were patterns in the rework the billing clerk was doing. With that knowledge, they were able to use some complicated formulas in Excel to analyze and automatically rework the raw data. Not perfect, but with a couple days of effort, they were able to develop a spreadsheet-based tool that would reduce the time required from about 30 hours a week to about 30 minutes a week. It was not an elegant solution, as the eventual technology from FedEx would be, and there were still 30 minutes of rework required every single week. But they saved 29.5 hours a week for nine months, simply by looking beyond the first, obvious solution for something within their control that they could implement quickly.

Eat the Elephant One Bite at a Time

Many of us choose scopes that are way too big. A large scope greatly slows the work and reduces the likelihood of success, making the project into a lumbering giant. Our instincts may tell us if we have a big scope, we will have a big win – but the opposite is more often true. To get good results quickly, we must take a big problem and break it down into bite-sized chunks. For example, one company chartered a team to “improve delivery time.” This was way too large a scope. They looked at the data and found the most customer dissatisfaction was around custom tooling where the deliveries were late 80% of the time. The team was able to develop a tightly defined and focused scope that was meaningful and could be addressed quickly.

One very simple way to narrow down the scope is to gather a team around a white board with a line down the middle and the words “IS” and “IS NOT” written at the top. Then ask the group to work on defining what the problem is and what the problem is not. This method draws on everyone’s insight into the current situation and the different ways they could limit the scope to something meaningful and manageable.

Rely on the People Close to the Work

The people closest to the work often have the best ideas about the problem and possible solutions. They live with the problems in the work every day and are a great source of possible “quick fixes.” A [Waste Walk](#) is a great way to explore the work and talk to the people close to the work to identify potential targets for improvements or for a “kaizen blitz.”

Keep it Simple

The simpler the better. Cross organizational projects move much more slowly as priorities and approvals must be aligned in order to make progress. The fewer people on the team, the simpler it is to get



together and get to work on the problem. Start small and simple, execute, and build the skills and motivation to tackle more and more problems.

Enjoy It!

A Quick Win is both satisfying and fun! Make sure you celebrate and spread the news. Take measurements, take pictures, take the team to lunch! Then go back and do it again.