Sustaining the Gains

a Partners In Improvement Briefing by

Sustaining improvements is a fundamental aspect of Continuous Improvement. When the gain has been celebrated and attention shifted elsewhere, how do we keep the improvement from sliding back to the old way? To maintain the gains we have to stabilize the new process and new behaviors or the process will slip back out of control and people will slip back into old habits. How do we extend the improvement to other areas? How do we adapt the improvement efforts so they survive over the long term — getting better and better? These questions are at the heart of ‘Step 7’ of Conway’s eight-step improvement process. These were among the questions posed during our Partners in Improvement forum, when the Partners discussed the challenge of making Continuous Improvement part of the organization’s DNA and how to convert project successes into sustained improved performance.

The ‘Backslide’

Identifying and implementing an improvement is cause for celebration and congratulations. A novice in improvement might feel this an appropriate moment to transition one’s attention to the next challenge. Those experienced with the process realize that without careful attention to sustainability and even ‘spreadability’, the improved results may evaporate as the process gradually reverts to an old, less well-controlled process.

Several forces undermine sustainability. The issues and pressures that triggered the change are no longer visible or apparent to people. Attention moves on to something else before the improvement has been effectively stabilized. Sometimes those who initiated the change or participated in the analysis and improvement leave the organization and the on-going success of the improvement may be dependent on their understanding and adherence to the improved process. Sometimes replacements inadvertently introduce variability.

The Lean Institute’s Gemba coach, Michael Ballé, identifies two major causes. First, organizations can lose their focus. This can sometimes jeopardize the entire CI effort. Loss of focus is more profound ‘when an organization engages in strategic maneuvers.’ People’s roles are redefined, organizations, equipment, tools, teams are all in flux, creating mounds of waste that needs to be studied and removed — just when the teamwork needed to do it is at an all time low due to job anxieties. The second major factor Ballé cites is the inevitable adverse developments of life. Every system is constantly drifting back out of alignment. ‘Stuff happens,’ a snag arises and ‘we do not have the knowledge and/or energy to fight back.’ Continuous improvement requires a diligence and perseverance to tackle the new challenges just as systematically as you tackled the old. It is not enough to implement an improvement — a system of improvement must be in place right along side of the improvement itself.

Failure to measure results, or implementing conflicting measures can also lead to backsliding on the improvements.

These universal pressures make is essential that the people involved in continuous improvement give careful thought to how the improvements will be self-sustaining, once the attention and/or the advocates have moved on.
“Stickability” — making sure our improvements last

Management can encourage sustainability by never waverering on standards and expectations for high quality and productivity. Achievement followed by recognition and communication of the success helps to sustain the commitment to the improvement. One Partner who is CEO of a manufacturing company reported a recent high intensity, systematic, well-led effort to implement process improvements and 5S in one line after another. The results to date have been impressive. Morale has greatly improved. “People snap back to work instead of shuffling in from their break.” Even the floors are cleaner. People are very proud of their improvements.

Involving the people doing the work in any initiative is critical to the sustainability of any improvement. Their participation will help ensure the improvement will fit effectively and that the people who must implement really understand it. Furthermore, involvement increases commitment. When a snag or a stumble with the new process arises, the organization can work through it effectively or revert to the old familiar. The odds of staying the path toward improvement are much higher if the people have been involved in the design of the improvement.

Faithfully following the 8-step process will help to set the stage for sustainability because you will have the data to manage it. If we began by quantifying the waste and then, in step 6, we have measured the results, we will likely be able to build effective process measures that will let us know if and when the process has begun to backslide.

Building the success into the budget helps to sustain the gains.

One participant identified the benefit of building the improvements into next year’s budget. The idea is that this will help create the impetus to address the new snags that cause a new leak in the value stream and allow the waste to seep back in.

Writing the improvements into the standard operating procedures was considered to be essential — although not necessarily sufficient. Several participants said their organizations maintained the gains in part by auditing adherence. ISO provides a natural method for reducing the variability. However, when deviation from the procedure was found, it was important to try to understand why the procedure was not followed. What does it show about further opportunity for improvement?

Understanding why each deviation occurs enables people to distinguish between careless non-compliance and an indication that the procedure was not working for them, and they had found a better way. If there is a better way, it extends the improvement and becomes part of the new procedures that everyone follows. If not, there is the conversation, “I thought we all agreed ...” in order to get back to consistent adherence to the process.

One of the Partners found that the large changes were actually easier to maintain, because the benefits were so substantial that no one would think of going back to the old way. For small improvements, sometimes people felt that the improvement was not worth the learning curve. Minor, ease-of-use improvements can be ‘quick wins’ but face more resistance, even though they are measurably better. “We ask people to try the improved system five times before they decide they don’t like it.”

Productivity per employee is a measurement that helps one organization maintain the productivity improvements. The team can see their unit’s performance and the effects of their process improvements.
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One organization uses what they call “robust barriers” to keep the process in control with no backsliding. Poka-yokes — techniques that make it hard to do the wrong way and easy to do it the better way — are broadly effective. One Partner explained that in their SAP system there are several ways to do something. When a new and better method is found or developed, they make the system change so that this becomes the default method. Another participant makes broad use of poka-yokes in creating and maintaining improvements. They have found color-coding and other visual controls to be very helpful in implementing and maintain improvements.

Sustainability, ultimately, is a function of consistency and management attention, what Dr. Deming would call “constancy of purpose.” When the CEO or plant manager walks out on the shop floor, it is a fantastic opportunity to notice and reinforce the gains, and to ask about what other possibilities people see. “It’s all about the leadership; when the workers see it is important to you, it is important to them.” One of our Partners reported 300 - 400 documented improvements per year. Each improvement is presented to the Quality Council which meets for 90 minutes twice a month: they learn what the problem was, how the team fixed it, and what the benefit was.

‘Spreadability’ — standardizing the improvement throughout the organization

‘Spreadability’ is the second half of Step 7: “Stabilize and standardize the improvement” — and presents additional challenges. Improvements are much more easily implemented and sustained when the change was designed by the people who will use it. By definition, this means that standardizing across organizations involved implementation by people who were not part of the development team. One of our participants has 250 different offices and realizes ‘spreadability’ is key to an efficient CI program. Obviously progress will be much faster if the offices build on one another’s investment in time and effort to study a problem, find the root cause, and design and test a solution. Their central CI office does everything possible to encourage exchange of ideas: quarterly meetings of CI leaders, conference calls, a CI wiki to share ideas.

Some organizations encourage people to go around and visit other sites to find and adopt ideas. One organization gives people full credit for improvement in their rewards and recognitions programs, even if the idea was not original. Another gives extra credit for borrowing ideas from other organizations or even other applications. For example, a report is a report. If an improvement streamlined one report, perhaps it can be applied to another. If a 5S technique worked well on the manufacturing line, maybe it will help streamline an office.

Communications techniques such as conference calls, CI wikis, ‘tips and tricks’ on the Intranet, can help. But even so, it is difficult to spread an improvement when people are busy with their own internal priorities. Keeping the improvement projects small and tightly scoped helps keep them more spreadable.

Success itself is a great advertisement, if it is visible enough. When people see how well things are working in one area, department, or assembly line, they start asking, “when can you help me?”

As we move forward on our never-ending journey of Continuous Improvement, achieving sustainability and spreadability will have a huge impact on our pace of improvement. Considering how to achieve these from the very outset of our process improvement will help us achieve results of which we can all be proud.

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