

EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

Overview

From a practical standpoint, this trust-building system is designed to accelerate and simplify employee involvement in continuous efforts to systematically improve individual and organizational performance. A cornerstone of that system is a process that works at both the micro and the macro levels to achieve the desired involvement and improvement goals. It is designed to not only facilitate the rapid generation of daily improvements, but also to foster a continuous improvement mindset among employees that stems from implicit trust and produces an empowering shift in attitudes.

Strategy and Rationale

The typical approach to most systematic continuous improvement efforts is neither systematic nor continuous. The traditional suggestion program and the team-based techniques that came out of the total quality management movement are two striking examples. While the underlying premise of both processes made sense, most organizations treated them as ancillary programs that were not woven into the basic fabric of day-to-day operations. The processes also were awkward, burdensome, slow, and inequitably administered. That produced more frustrations than improvements and eventually resulted in the disintegration of many such programs.

The employee involvement and improvement process built into this trust-building system is designed to overcome those shortcomings in several ways:

- By focusing employees on small, incremental improvements within their own areas of responsibility and control
- By recognizing all employees for their level of participation regardless of the value of the improvement
- By scaling team-based improvement efforts in a way that minimizes down time and provides people with the tools and techniques to produce successful outcomes
- By positioning supervisors as the catalyst for cultural change through a coaching and support role in the employee involvement and improvement process

The ultimate result is that employees feel trusted in taking initiative, substantive operational improvements are produced, and customer satisfaction is increased.

Tactical Design

The process consists of two main components that accelerate the rate of improvement:

1. Individual implemented improvements
2. Team-based system improvements

Individual Implemented Improvements

The traditional suggestion program has several key flaws that make it difficult to sustain:

- It requires someone else to evaluate and sometimes implement the suggestions that other employees submit.
- It suggests that the person doing the approval has better judgment about the value of an idea than the person submitting it who may be more familiar with the situation being improved. That makes employees feel untrusted and their ideas unvalued.
- People usually feel that it takes too long to get any response to their suggestions, and they wind up criticizing managers for not being responsive.
- People often suggest improvements outside of their area of knowledge and influence, which sets them up for failure.

The following recommended process for generating individual improvements overcomes those shortcomings:

1. Rather than submitting suggestions for someone else to approve and implement, employees are provided with the training and given the responsibility to take the initiative to make improvements on their own without prior approval. Those improvements are focused within the scope of the employee's main job responsibilities.
2. Upon making improvements, employees complete a form to document what they have done and present it to their supervisors. The main role of the supervisor is not to approve or disapprove, but to acknowledge the improvement and point out any extenuating circumstances that the person may need to be aware of regarding their improvement.
3. All forms are then placed into weekly random drawings for some type of award and recognition that is determined and specified by each individual organization. Improvements are eligible for the drawing only during the week in which they are submitted.
4. At the end of each quarter, every individual who has met his or her individual goal of implemented improvements receives some type of valued recognition.

Team-based process improvement:

As with the traditional individual suggestion program, many of the team-based improvement efforts of the past have been designed in ways that make it difficult for groups to work together effectively to produce successful results. Key employees were asked to be on numerous teams, which increased time away from their primary jobs. Teams had to meet over a long period of time due to the complexity of the improvement effort. It was difficult for the teams to see results from their efforts from meeting to meeting. Consensus and brainstorming for new ideas was difficult due to the number of employees on the team. Most employees had limited opportunity to participate on a process improvement team.

The team-based approach offered in this trust-building system overcomes those difficulties in the following ways:

- By breaking large process initiatives into numerous manageable projects.
- By establishing upfront measurement targets for each team.
- By establishing small 3-5 employee teams meeting for a 30-60 minute session over a 3-4 week period of time.
- By using a simple, visual readily facilitated process-mapping approach.
- By creating the opportunity for numerous incremental improvements to be implemented during each session.
- By increasing opportunities for all employees to participate in a meaningful and efficient manner.
- By giving employees a broader perspective on how their individual jobs fit into the big picture.
- By giving employees a big-picture perspective and having cross-functional teams that allow employees to see their job as part of the larger process of taking care of the patient instead of an isolated job function.

Key characteristics and outcomes of the process include:

- Maximizes participation of employees working on process improvement teams
- Greatly reduces the time commitment for any one employee
- Each team will begin with measurement objectives and finalize improvement with measurement validation.
- Significantly increases the number of incremental improvements implemented by employees.
- Dramatically increases the organization's rate of improvement.
- Large improvement initiatives are appropriately scaled into numerous smaller projects allowing for greater employee participation and reduced time off the job for any one employee.

General details of how the process operates are as follows:

1. Rather than having teams work on large, complex processes, numerous smaller teams are formed, allowing the appropriate employee to become involved.
2. The large complex process is scaled appropriately after an initial process-mapping document is created.
3. The larger process-mapping document is then used to maintain alignment for each of the teams.
4. Each sub team will meet once a week or every other week for 3-4 session of 30 to 60 minutes each. Those sessions will be facilitated by a trained member of the team. It is critical that processes are scaled properly in order for the teams to be successful within these time constraints.
5. Each team will create a more detailed process map of their smaller scale project.
6. Each team will have the opportunity to implement numerous incremental improvements during each session as they are working towards the larger measurement objective.
7. During the 3rd or 4th session each team will create a new process map of their project, indicating the process changes and providing validation of measurement improvement.