

Conducting the Orchestra for Continuous Improvement

By Les Landes, APR

If there's one thing you can count on with human beings, it's our constant desire for things to improve. We want today to be better than yesterday, and tomorrow to be better than today. When it comes to the workplace, there's a voice deep in the heart of most people saying, "I was meant for more."

For organizations with a fervor for innovation and continuous improvement, that should be very good news. Just tap into people's DNA, right? Not so fast.

Despite that innate yearning, a number of forces often combine to sabotage it. The good news is there's a path to bypass those barriers. Even better news, professional communicators are in an ideal position to facilitate the improvement process and have significant impact on business outcomes.

You can liken the communicator's role in continuous improvement to a conductor leading an orchestra. I've often said that communication is too important to be left in the hands of professional communicators.

Fact is, it's everyone's responsibility to communicate at their individual best. It's the professional communicator's job to orchestrate the overall performance so everyone plays their parts in concert with one another.

If that seems lofty, it should be music to the ears of any communicator aspiring to gain greater influence in their organization. It goes to the heart of a basic premise about the role of organizational communication, which should seek not to control people, but rather to align and synchronize their collective talents.

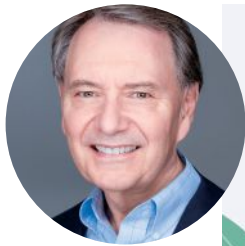
Bottom line, optimal continuous improvement depends largely on the systematic blend of effective communication structures, processes and content for its success.

Sustainable outputs

Before you rush out and grab the baton, it's vital to understand the "saboteurs" who can cripple the natural impulse for continuous improvement and end your performance on a sour note. The problem starts with a shortsighted view of what is meant by "continuous."

Noted author Jim Collins is renowned for his assertion that "good is the enemy of great." That's true, but insufficient. More important, great is the enemy of better. It's great to be great, but if you become content with greatness, you won't stay there for long.

Most managers would agree, but too often they wind up getting caught in the



seductive "program trap" of high-sounding pronouncements and tempting one-off tactics — open-door policy, culture clubs, suggestion committees, pizza Fridays, employee of the month award, town hall meetings and so on.

There's nothing wrong with most of that activity, but if the main focus is not on day-to-day operating systems and processes, improvement efforts ultimately become anemic, episodic and unsustainable.

Getting past that trap takes a systematic approach that generates a sustainable output of improvements from every corner of the organization on a constant basis — in other words, a "continuous improvement habit." That's mainly due to the distinctive dual essence of human nature.

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The animal part of us wants things to be predictable, stable and habitual — what all living creatures need for comfort, safety and survival.

The people part of us craves to exercise our uniquely human gifts of imagination and free will to push boundaries, explore possibilities and color outside the lines of the natural world.

Taken together, those two inimitable gifts comprise a compelling force that propels human beings to amazing feats of creation. It's also the main driver behind our longing for things to be constantly improving and better than before.

For organizations trying to run a business, that poses a dilemma. On one

hand, they need routines and habits to ensure predictability, consistency and control. Otherwise, chaos can set in and jeopardize the group's survival.

On the other hand, risk-taking, innovation and continuous improvement are vital, or you can get left behind making buggy whips while your competition is building a spacecraft.

Continuous assessment

So how do you manage that inescapable duality? You do it by satisfying both aspects of human nature simultaneously. You create a habit for continuous improvement to break the habit of mindlessly repeating processes the same way over and over again.

In other words, you overlay routine work with an overarching system that leverages the potential energy of imagination and free will to continuously challenge the status quo.

In her book, "Better Than Before," Gretchen Rubin sums up the point brilliantly. "Habit is a good servant, but a bad master," she says. Well-established habits and processes make work smoother and more predictable. But if you stay static without continuous reflection, assessment and adjustment — no matter how good processes appear to be — you will eventually become a slave to them.

Essential processes

So what are specific actions you can take to remain the masters of your habits and processes?

For starters, put "participate in continuous improvement processes" into everyone's job description.

One of those essential processes is a team huddle conducted weekly for 30 minutes at regular times solely for the purpose of continuous improvement:

- ➔ Select a few relevant metrics for each team/department, and review them at every huddle. Then probe for the "stories" that the numbers tell.
- ➔ Review the status of improvements in progress, invite new ideas, and track them on an Improvements Tracking Form.
- ➔ Acknowledge and express appreciation for the contributions of co-workers.
- ➔ Give employees time away from their main jobs to work on improvements, generally 2-4 hours per week.

Another valuable continuous improvement tool is what I call the DEMI system for business process management, which stands for Document, Execute, Monitor and Improve. It's a streamlined, systematic method to examine all work processes on a routine schedule to ensure they are operating with optimal efficiency and effectiveness.

The catalog of continuous improvement processes is extensive — Kanban boards, PDCA cycle, 5S framework for waste reduction, Kaizen reviews, 5 Whys to identify root causes and many more. All of them can be found online or through organizations such as the American Society for Quality.

Whatever methods or tools you use, it's important to recognize that their success is grounded largely in the systematic blend of effective communication structures, processes and content.

As experts in that arena, organizational communicators have a distinct opportunity to serve as conductors helping teams make beautiful music together. ❖

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