

September 2016



## Putting the Continuous in Continuous Improvement

Dear Drew,

My journeys and conversations over the past few months involved numerous discussions with organizations struggling to sustain their lean efforts. "We've lost momentum" "The improvements are coming fewer and farther between" "We can't seem to sustain the changes we already made" These are just a few of the statements that the organizations have made to me during those conversations. Some have been practicing lean for 2-3 years, others as much as 5-6 years.

I always ask a few questions to understand the history. In some cases, the situation is not as dire as they first believe. Various lean 'tools' remain in place and are still effective. Office and/or manufacturing cells remain in operation still providing the expected results. 5S is being maintained. And so on. In some cases it is just a misunderstanding of what 'practicing' lean means. Just because the organization is no longer scheduling days-long 'events' at a high frequency does not mean improvement is not taking place. People were able to describe various improvements that have provided important benefits. Strategic initiatives were still been undertaken, insuring the organization's long term viability. However, those

improvements were not getting the 'publicity' that the big 'events' and projects had once received. In other cases it is where the organization was in its lean journey. The application of the various lean tools had already taken place. Layouts based on flow have been implemented, pull/kanban systems have been put in place to insure a high level of customer service. The 'big and sexy' changes were already accomplished. The nature of the 'problems' that now arose were somewhat different. The proverbial 'low hanging fruit' has already been reaped. In a few cases, the effort and practice had indeed come to a halt.

In all cases, I greatly appreciate the concern of the organization that a continuous improvement culture has yet to firmly take root. This is always a concern of mine. Often the senior leaders with whom I am having these conversations describe where they had to once again 'get involved' in an area or a particular concept in order to renew the energy and effort. "We need middle management to step up." I typically respond that the need for senior leaders to maintain involvement at some level will never go away, but that their concern with middle management is probably well founded. Recognition that the organization is not quite 'there' is a necessary first step. Recognizing the key to success lies with front line and middle management is the next.

### *Key to Success #1: Focus on Middle Management!*

In the 30 years that I have been practicing Continuous Improvement, I have heard that the biggest source of resistance, and therefore the key to success lies with middle management. The front line leaders are where the 'rubber hits the road', and their managers - middle management - must be consistently supportive. These are the folks who ultimately define the local or 'sub-cultures' within an organization. Therefore middle management must be 'sold' on the idea that engaging all associates in continuous improvement is a positive thing for themselves and the organization. They must also have the required mindsets and skills for continuous improvement. This includes: practicing systems and process thinking, being data and fact driven, having strong problem solving and process improvement skills, possessing a firm understanding of the various improvement methodologies and tools, and finally, the ability to teach all of this to others over time.

Wow! That is a lot to ask of middle managers, but ask we must. There is just not enough 'bandwidth' for a 'Lean Office', 'Kaizen Promotion Office', or whatever title you can give to the few true lean or CI professionals that an organization may employ. The CI professionals cannot be everywhere at all times. It is impossible. I recall having conversations with several large organizations that were about to embark on the lean journey. They lamented about the size of the organization and the fact that they had 12,000 - 18,000 associates. When I pointed out the the key was to focus on developing the 120 - 180 middle managers, and then let them develop their front line leaders and subsequently the team members, the undertaking did not seem so overwhelming. Developing the requisite mindsets and skills in anyone - whether it be front line or middle managers, or associates - requires practice, practice, practice. The focus must be on the development of the middle managers. While they are learning and practicing with their natural work teams, those team members will also begin the learning process. This leads to the next key success factor.

### *Key to Success #2: Practice, Practice, Practice*

Senior leaders must understand what it really takes to develop skills, habits and mindsets. Various studies dating back to Edward Thorndike's 'Psychology of Learning' (1913) make it clear that it takes repetition. 4 - 7 repetitions to begin to create skills, 17 - 27 repetitions or 1 to 2 months to begin to create habit. The exact figures depend on many things (e.g. complexity of the task, length of time between practice, amount and type of 'disruption' between practice), and are not important. All the studies clearly show it takes more than a few kaizen events, or six sigma projects, or A3s - whatever the methodology - to make CI a 'habit' within an individual.

I often ask senior leaders just how often an individual has been given the opportunity to deliberately practice CI within their organizations. The responses vary but typically range from 1 to 4 times in a year. I then relate to them what the studies have told us for over 100 years now. They quickly understand that it is the lack of practice that is a major contributor to the aforementioned 'gap' of a sustainable culture for continuous improvement. An important learning indeed.

During the late 1980s, I received criticism from several of my mentors at General Electric. It involved the fact that I often went for 'home runs' (to use a baseball analogy) when leading improvement efforts, and that I was missing an important point about CI. I was missing numerous opportunities to develop the 'change habit' in myself and others - to help people become more amenable to change - which is a prerequisite to being an effective problem solver and process improver. It wasn't the scope or the scale of the change that was important, but rather the practice of change itself. I was quite stubborn about this. It wasn't until the early 1990s when I learned about behavioral psychology and more specifically educational psychology that I came to realize that my approach was seriously lacking.

I learned that 'small ball' (still with the baseball terminology) was not just acceptable but preferred. The likelihood for an individual to change after 4 or 7 relatively small and faster changes is much greater than after 1 or 2 large and typically longer ones. It is just how it is. People will catch the 'change habit' sooner. Only front line and middle managers are in a position to seize the many opportunities to practice CI in the natural course of the busy business day. However, to make the process most effective it must be deliberate practice which is our final key.

### *Key to Success #3: Deliberate Practice*

The human brain seeks patterns. Educational psychology is quite clear on this. Practice cannot be haphazard. It is imperative that an organization and its leaders follow set methodologies for improvement. Many variations exist on W. Edwards Deming's 'Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA)' - the time tested improvement process. We will not go into them here. Suffice it to say that PDCA is practiced during rapid improvement events, A3s, DMAIC, etc. etc. The key is that the organization and all its leaders practice a consistent methodology, always relating improvement efforts in this context in order to maximize the learning for all associates with whom the leader interacts. Further, Deming taught that improvement should be 'directional' - ideally aligned with the longer term goals and objectives of the organization. Once again, only front line and middle management are in a position to repeatedly convey that direction to all associates over time.

## Summary

More and more organizations are learning what it really takes to create a culture for continuous improvement. Many are finally investing in the effective development of their middle and front line managers. Further, these organizations are learning the benefits of rapid PDCA cycles, small and large, to the development of those leaders and in turn all associates. In recent years, other terms have arisen to describe them such as 'Kata' or 'Daily Improvement'. Regardless of term the underlying principles - the 'keys to success' - are absolute truths to anyone who understands how people develop skills, and create habits and mindsets. They must be understood by all leaders who wish to put the 'continuous in continuous improvement'.

Best Regards

Drew Locher

Managing Director, Change Management Associates

## Opportunities to Learn Rapid PDCA Abound!

There are many opportunities to learn how to effectively develop the skills and abilities of middle managers and front line managers to practice and teach Continuous Improvement. The University of Michigan's 'Kata for Daily Improvement has its next offering November 3-4. The Mid-Atlantic Kata Practitioner Day will be November 9 in Philadelphia PA. Then there is KataCon 2017 in San Diego CA February 21-22, 2017. Bring some colleagues and learn how to put the 'continuous in continuous improvement'



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