



The Cobbler's Children

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You've probably realized that this article's title refers to the well-known fact that a busy cobbler will be so busy making shoes for his customers that he has no time to make some for his own children. So too is this the case for the "improvement process."

Process improvement is itself a process that can be improved, yet it is often ignored by the very professionals who spend their time improving other work processes.

Is your improvement process as successful as you want it to be? How well would your improvement process work if everything were exactly right the environment, the people's skills, motivation, understanding of improvement, the improvement methodology and how it is executed, the materials used, the information available? Nothing is ever exactly right, but what should you improve first and foremost in order to improve your organization's system of improvement? How do you begin to study your improvement process in order to identify ways of accelerating and increasing your results?

Some organizations are very, very good at process improvement. Have you ever wondered how they get so good at it? The odds are, they have studied and "improved" the improvement process.

Now that we've established this fact, let's discuss some basics associated with improving the improvement process.



Organizational Learning: Micro v. Macro

For an organization to get better at process improvement requires organizational learning. Of course, each improvement project is an opportunity for learning by the individuals on the improvement team, but that is on a micro level. The participants learn a great deal about the particular problem or process, and they also learn some things about how and how not to improve a process or solve a problem. The more improvements they work on, the more they learn. But individual learning does not automatically translate into organizational learning; nor does it help you identify where your organization's system of process improvement is working and where it should be improved.

Collectively, an organization has the opportunity to learn from each improvement team's project the successes, the stumbling blocks, and the 'lessons learned'. By putting in place an effective means of gathering information about a full set of projects, you can identify and address the systemic barriers, bottlenecks, and stumbling blocks in your organization's system of process improvement. Organizations that go beyond launching a set of individual process improvements to effectively studying and improving the organization's system of improvement are most likely to become the industry leaders.

Repeatable Methodology

Before you can study and improve your process, you need a process improvement methodology that people understand and follow. Our 8-Step Improvement Methodology is a good example, as it is simple and is used effectively by many companies. Other organizations use other methodologies, such as the Six Sigma DMAIC methodology; others customize a methodology to suit their culture and vocabulary. But whatever method you choose, it must be standardized and used consistently before you can study and improve it. In this regard, improving your organization's process improvement is like improving any other type of work process.

Data Collection

Keep the data collection actionable, easy, and unintimidating. As you set up a system to gather project data that will help you study and improve your organization's skill at process improvement, take care to set the right tone.



Essential to process improvement are trained, experienced, and motivated project leaders and participants. Thus, the benefits of participating have to out-weigh the risks and hassle or people will opt out. If you are not careful to set the right tone and recognize and reward participation, few people will stick with it long enough to become very experienced and effective, and your improvement process is bound for failure.

Prevent fear of failure, especially early on; when your people have less experience they will follow some dead-ends, jump to some erroneous conclusions, over or under analyze, and/or skip a step that costs them time in the end. Each of these is an opportunity for individual and collective learning, if and only if it is safe to acknowledge mistakes. If you set up your project tracking system so that it seems like a threat, people will do their best to find convincing reasons not to participate. Make plain that you offer plenty of upside opportunity for people who participate in improving the work and share their learning, including mistakes. And make sure process improvement is a safe endeavor in your organization.

Keep it simple for the project leaders. Don't go overboard with what you want people to track. Keep it simple. Think through in advance what you need and how you will use it so you are not tempted to ask for extra information 'just in case'. Find ways to minimize the reporting burden on your project leaders so they can focus on executing their improvement project. Wherever possible use existing documents, such as the project charters, and gather the data yourself or delegate to someone other than the project leaders so they can concentrate on their projects.

Keep it actionable. Keep in mind that this is all about gathering the information YOU need in order to improve your organization's improvement process. Think through the many data elements discussed below to decide which ones are most important to you. Keep in mind that you do not have to tackle everything at once. You can track and improve one aspect of the improvement process first and add other elements later on.

Next Steps

At the outset of each project it is likely you will want to capture relevant information that will help you find the best opportunities for improving the improvement process. In our next issue we will examine the various types of information you might consider tracking and also discuss some best practices associated with making prudent use of this information.