



The No Limits Workplace
Aligning Work with the Human Spirit
Yielding Enduring Prosperity and Individual Reward

Tenet 4 - Effective Use of Continuous Improvement (CI) Tools, Techniques, Methods

“People naturally want to improve themselves and the world around them. If you help them fulfill that desire they’ll return your investment in them many times over”

That fact of human nature has been understood and acted upon by only a very small percentage of employers. Our traditional structures and assumptions of work often defeat these very positive inclinations that exist within people. But more than ever, today’s business environment is such that organizations that construct the many aspects of the workplace around that fact are benefiting greatly. And effective use of continuous improvement tools and techniques plays an integral part in that investment in people and their ability to provide a great return.

BASIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF CI

Every manager wants their organization to be more responsive, adaptable, smarter, and more innovative. Those performance characteristics are becoming requirements in today’s more complex, faster-changing and more competitive environment. So... How to? As we point out below, effective use of continuous improvement (CI) tools and methods is a necessary component for achieving the high performance level that these characteristics represent. But what is “effective use” of these tools?

Consistent with the No Limits Workplace approach, let’s work from a basic understanding of human nature. Every employee wants to be responsive, adaptable, smarter and more innovative. Who doesn’t want to grow and be a contributor and even a hero at work? So maybe we shouldn’t ask... What do we need to do to get our organizations to demonstrate these attributes. Maybe our question should be... What is it about our traditional organizations that prevent people from doing and being these things that they want to do and be? Now that’s a good question. In fact, every day our organizations defeat these natural positive tendencies we all share. So... the No Limits Workplace to the rescue! In this case it’s Tenet 4, the effective use of CI tools for raising the bar on group success and individual reward.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Defining some terms... When we speak of CI tools we’re talking about the world of lean, sigma, Toyota Production System (TPS), etc. As advocates know, there are many varieties of CI tools and hundreds of different approaches, formats, and templates for applying these tools. Go to any CI-related website. The information appears endless. But don’t let that massive quantity of information and applications overwhelm you. As we’ll see, maximizing the potential of these tools in your organization has much more to do with common-sense and good business instincts than encyclopedic lean knowledge. It’s much less about complex terminology and lean black belts and much more about the right motivations, clear thinking, and having a good feel, better yet a passion, for operations, the workplace, and people.

TWO BASIC CI MISCONCEPTIONS

There are two basic misconceptions about CI tools and methods that have kept them from becoming the much more effective applications they can be. It’s imperative that we avoid these common misconceptions if we’re to apply CI tools and get the full impact of their use.

Misconception one is the sense that these tools are primarily for manufacturing. Without going into detail, we’ll just say that is completely wrong. There are books that address that but briefly, all the tools and techniques of CI are just common-sense devices for improving the way work is done. A simple example. If you ask someone what the tools for say, painting fences are. They’ll likely say, paint, brushes, ladders, scrapers, maybe a paint sprayer, a drop cloth, etc. That’s easy for anyone to picture. Now, if you ask



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them, what the tools are for improving the way you paint fences (less time prepping or painting, less mess, safer, less missed spots, fewer materials used, able to do more variety of fences, etc.) Most people will struggle to picture what those tools are. And rightfully so. What the heck are “improvement tools” anyhow? One might say, I’ll just learn to do the job better by experience. Normally that’s what people do. They get assigned to a job, hopefully with some decent training and if they recognize improvements and can make them happen themselves, they probably will.

Our points here are several, so we’ll list them.

1. In today’s fast-changing and competitive world just knowing how to do a job and then making improvements in an unstructured serendipitous way isn’t going to be enough. That will become much more apparent if you find yourself competing with a company that’s committed to continuous improvement as a way of life and that does CI in a highly organized and structured way at all levels of the enterprise (why not be that company?).
2. Except for very simple and repeatable jobs of which there are fewer and fewer, when people come to work we need to provide them with “improvement tools” just as we supply them with paint brushes and scrapers or computers, software, information or any other “work tools”. They walk in the door and we say... “Here’s your CI tools and here’s how you use them.” Why don’t we do that if we really want improvement to be the norm?
3. We need to think of work / jobs as “evolving things” not “static things”. Because that’s what’s they’re becoming more each day. It’s just the truth of the matter. Seeing it that way, we realize that people have to be equipped with the “tools to evolve”. We might even say that the improvement part is becoming more important than the doing part. Like the difference between a circle and a sphere. Both are round but one has more dimensions than the other. Almost all work is becoming more a sphere, more multi-dimensional, yet people are prepped and managed to deal with a flat circle.
4. Obviously that implies that business leaders need to have a solid understanding of the CI tools so they can manage their usage into the workforce. Leadership’s knowledge of CI tools and techniques needn’t be in great depth. But as we’re discussing here, does need to be in great depth of understanding about how CI “fits” into today’s business world and what it takes for companies to develop a CI culture.
5. Also, we need to recognize that the most beneficial and high-impact work improvements are not done in isolation. They often require that individuals work with others up and downstream of their job. It’s in these work processes, supply chains, and connections that have become more and more complex and harder to picture, especially in office environments, that endless opportunities for improvements exist and CI tools become incredibly helpful.

Hopefully it’s clear that usage of these tools is by no means exclusive to manufacturing any more than ongoing improvement is exclusive to manufacturing.

Misconception two we addressed partially in the above but let’s look at it a little further. Working from their top-down perspective, managers almost universally perceive CI tools as a skill set for “professional-types” to learn and apply. Sure our professional CI folks often do their work with “involvement” from other employees. But most of the learning and application is done at the professional level. This second misconception isn’t so much wrong as it is highly incomplete or perhaps misguided. And it ensures that when organizations apply CI strategies, they come nowhere close to maximizing the full potential of the tools.

Here’s the deal. The real power and potential of CI tools and methods comes in driving their use down and throughout the entire enterprise. These things are the toolkit and skill set for all workers to learn to apply so they can drive higher value work throughout the enterprise (see tenet 3 on higher value work). We might say it this way. Instead of investing great amounts of CI tools training in a few employees as many organizations do (black belts, SWAT teams, etc.); the better equation is to invest a comparatively



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small amount of CI tools training in a lot of or even all employees. As we stated above, people need to be supplied with these tools just as they need to be supplied with the regular tools for performing the job.

Continuous improvement has to be an expectation of the job, therefore we have to supply the tools, know-how, and opportunity to do that. So for example, instead of training 4 to 6 professional employees in great depth to work on CI efforts with 300 employees; much greater returns, especially over the long haul, will come from training many or all employees at a surface level. The continual use of basic CI tools by employees throughout the enterprise has much to do with the creation of the powerful bottom-up “organically evolving organization” we’ve mentioned.

Of course employees need a certain amount of direction and facilitation to make effective use of these tools, especially at first. But importantly, because these tools and methods are so naturally attuned to what employees know is necessary in order for them to work more effectively in today’s environment, the know-how challenge is much less than generally assumed. Basic training in process mapping, brainstorming, 5S, meeting facilitation, and work standardization can go an extremely long way in transitioning a workplace away from reactivity and chaos and towards being permanently structured for increasing efficiency, responsiveness, adaptability, and innovation. And because these tools are such a good fit with what employees already know and want, the tendency is for employees to naturally / organically become more and more effective with their use as they apply them (like any good tool). We’re simply supplying people with resources they already know they need. Or put another way, aligning work, in this case tools and the opportunity to use them, with the intuitive human spirit.

Per other tenets of the NLW, the training and use of the tools as a stand-alone strategy won’t have a lot of impact. It’s in aligning or integrating these CI efforts with the other tenets that potential is maximized. In particular, decentralized org’ structures must be put in place (Tenet 5) that effectively position employees to identify improvement opportunities, participate in decisions about what to work on, and learn to effectively apply the right tools, have success with them, and see the results of their efforts. The perspective and know-how in all the other tenets is highly supportive of a full-tilt continuous improvement system and culture.

GOOD PROCESS = GOOD RESULTS

A good “CI principle” to consider at this point is this. Good process is the key to good results. Results are an output of an equation and when the equation is complete (right people, tools, usage of tools, direction and support, implementation) then the output or result comes easily. Good process must start with the right stakeholders. Without them it can’t be good process and results will suffer. Then good process requires the use of effective tools and methods. Process maps, brainstorming techniques, problem solving tools, decision matrices, and other CI tools help ensure full participation from stakeholders, clear objectives, sound analysis, and good ideas. And good process also requires stakeholder involvement in implementation to the degree possible. When people are engaged in developing a solution, they will do much to ensure it’s success when implemented. Conversely, when people are “handed” a solution by someone else, they have much less vested interest in it’s success. Engagement is critical to success for many reasons.

In summary, failure is rare when good process is used. Even when the first solution isn’t the best, given the engagement of people and good process, it’s easy to circle back and try other approaches. The “process infrastructure” (team, data, analysis, metrics, etc.) is already in place and just needs to be re-considered. Whereas without good process, a solution implementation failure often is left in place causing a less than optimum result or worse. And of course those who are effected by it are very likely to be displeased. Failure is most often just failure to use good process. If we don’t have the right stakeholders, failure is almost assured. If we don’t use good tools and techniques, again success will be much more the exception. And if we don’t involve the right people in implementation, the chances of



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success are much diminished. Again, good process is the key to good results. And CI tools, methods, and principles are all about good process.

SUMMARY AND GETTING STARTED

We mentioned that a small amount of across the board CI training makes for a much more powerful CI strategy than deep training of a relatively few professionals. Of course it's advantageous to have some number of very well trained and experienced professionals to act as facilitators and centers of experts and to work on the most challenging problems. But the vast majority of improvement opportunities don't require deep-analysis. Solutions to most problems and improvement opportunities just require a) that the problem or opportunity be identified, b) the right stakeholders be assigned to work on it, c) good management support and direction, d) decent tool usage, and e) a well-considered implementation including standardization of the improved practice. Non-professionals can usually manage these challenges better than professionals once positioned to do so. Black belt level six sigma application is of course valid and sometimes highly effective but more the exception than the rule.

And here's the other important part of getting all employees involved in CI. Not only will employees contribute to formal problem solving efforts but this training and engagement creates a continuous improvement mindset all the time. Employees will take that CI thinking to every moment and every task. Through their engagement in important problem solving they'll gain familiarity with company objectives and insight into the considerations and trade-offs that decision-making requires. They become better decision-makers and more likely to generate ideas that link to objectives. Additionally they'll feel more a part of the total enterprise and therefore more apt to align their interests with those of the organization. The benefits are many and constant. This is the kind of upward spiral or organizational momentum we all wish for.

Key to this strategy is to select the right tools and methods for the particular organization and just do basic training. Often no more than 15 minutes to 1/2 hr "per tool". And then immediately begin to provide opportunities to apply the tools towards meaningful problems and opportunities. From there, as with any tool or skill, additional capability will come somewhat naturally as employees use the tools and achieve results. Deep initial training is a mistake as it can make things seem to be more complex than they really are and also the knowledge won't stick until people actually use the tools.

The CI problem solving tools that are fairly universal and most commonly effective are process mapping, brainstorming techniques, maybe 5S, meeting facilitation, some best fit decision-making and prioritization tools, and standard work development. Especially with a commitment to standard work, an organization can come a long way towards having a highly effective CI system and culture with these fairly "natural" tools and techniques. And as employees apply these things, they'll only get more effective with them.

Linking to other tenets. The organizational structures for facilitating the CI system are mentioned in Tenet 5. Tenet 3 is all about positioning people to do higher value work which is what CI is. Tenet 2 provides the insights into human nature that align perfectly with continuous improvement and illustrate how and why CI makes work more meaningful. Tenet 6 on leadership is much about how pulling all of this together to provide people with the opportunity to succeed is leadership. And of course Tenet 1 explains the world that we're operating in that's making CI, or self-evolution, a joyful necessity.

Finally, as we often discuss relative to the NLW, introduction of these things is never that difficult because they align so naturally with what's best in us, what people want, and what companies need. The confusion comes in not being able to think our way past the self-defeating norms of yesteryear's business organization. We really need to get into a "start-over" mode when considering our org' structures, practices and expectations of people. People everywhere are just waiting for management teams to catch up with and act upon these positive things.