Continuous Improvement

Originating action to improve existing conditions and processes; using appropriate methods to identify opportunities, implement solutions, and measure impact.

Key Actions

- **Assesses opportunities**—Reviews processes to identify gaps between requirements and current outputs.

- **Determines causes**—Identifies potential conditions that contribute to gaps or key variances; explores relationships between conditions and effects; distinguishes causes from symptoms and identifies primary causes.

- **Targets improvement ideas**—Generates ideas for solutions; analyzes the effect or impact of each solution; selects appropriate solutions.

- **Implements effective improvements**—Tests solutions; gathers feedback on effectiveness; reviews impact on baseline measures; modifies solutions as appropriate to ensure effectiveness.

Quick Tips

- Make sure noteworthy ideas are incorporated or implemented.

- Experiment with new ideas or approaches. Conduct trial runs.

- Examine your assumptions about why things are done the way they are. Don’t assume there’s a good reason.

- When attempting to determine the cause of a problem, ask, “Why?” at least five times.

- Ask yourself, “What would happen if everything I propose goes perfectly?”

- Ask yourself, “What’s the worst that could happen if I try this?”

- Test your ideas.

- Inform people who will be affected by any changes.

- Remember the importance of the customer.

- Consult others who are knowledgeable or who might have had similar experiences.

- Keep your leader informed of your plans and outcomes.
Developmental Activities

Self-Directed

- Think about current processes that you are involved with at work. Ask yourself these questions to see where the processes can be improved:
  - Are customer requirements being neglected as a result of this process?
  - Do my coworkers or I miss opportunities to share important information that could prevent delays, misunderstandings, and waste?
  - Have I thought, “There’s got to be a better way”?

- Write down ideas as they occur, even if you are in the middle of another task. Keep the list handy and refer to it when you have time to consider the ideas further.

- Maintain a list or note-card file of new ideas, processes, and products you encounter, whether they are related to your job or not. Try to pursue or implement at least one idea each week.

- Identify barriers to innovation (barriers imposed by you, the department, the organization, or the system).

- Look for opportunities to solve problems affecting your department that might normally be addressed by higher management or someone else.

- Look for chronic problems in your department that have been taken for granted. Work on generating solutions.

- Observe a peer presenting a new suggestion to higher management. Note how the person gathered information for the presentation and the process he or she used to generate an action plan. What would you do differently or the same?

- Don’t be satisfied with your first idea, even if it seems like a good one. Defer emotional commitment to a solution until after you have explored alternatives.

- Read histories of other organizations to find ideas for solving problems that you face today.

- Investigate and practice idea-generating techniques (brainstorming, brain writing, or nominal group techniques).

Partnerships

- Set aside time at your next staff meeting to explore ideas for improvement; make this a standard practice in all staff meetings.

- Gather team members on a regular basis; establish this meeting as a time to brainstorm fresh ideas.
• Look for ways in which you might inadvertently discourage others’ ideas (not listening, criticizing ideas). Seek feedback from others and work on eliminating these behaviors.

• Ask people from different departments or disciplines how they address situations or problems similar to yours.

• Ask internal and external customers about their requirements; talk to lost customers to find out why they no longer use your products or services.

• Ask for feedback on your openness to new or different ideas. Solicit suggestions that could help develop your skills.

• Interview an internal or external customer who depends upon a work output that you are involved with. Ask this person to honestly identify any gaps between his or her requirements and the output that you provide. Strategize how you can improve work processes to narrow the gap.

**Targeted Assignments**

• Volunteer for a task force charged with improving a work process.

• Volunteer for a community project that requires solving a problem.

• Participate in a workshop designed to build process improvement skills.

**Workshops**

Look for a workshop that addresses the following:

• Redefining problems as opportunities.

• Creative problem solving.

• Generating and implementing process improvements.

**Readings**

**Books**


These stories contain lessons that make possible radical improvement of a department, a division, or an entire company.

Learn the principles of empowerment by reading this business fable that teaches lessons about self-empowerment, continuous improvement, teamwork, and the need to cultivate and maintain internal and external partnerships.


Aimed at those who are new to continuous improvement, this book provides an overview of theory as well as basic methods and tools. Clear guidelines are provided for improving decision-making and problem-solving skills; real-life scenarios illustrate key points and concepts.


This book of problem-solving tools includes chapters on assessing opportunities for improvement and implementing solutions. Personal evaluations enable readers to identify skills that need to be developed.


The novel format of this book underscores the practicality of the authors’ message. In it they present the “Theory of Constraints” in a very easy-to-understand way, and show how to make improvements in both manufacturing and service environments that contribute more directly to organizational success.


This is a step-by-step guide for frontline employees whose goal is to improve operations and processes to better serve both internal and external customers.


This manual, full of tools for applying continuous improvement principles to any job, provides step-by-step instructions to help readers analyze and define problems, generate ideas, make decisions, and execute plans.
Articles


Chairman of the Kaizen Institute of Japan, Masaaki Imai comments on American business’ use of Kaizen. He provides insight on what he calls “Gemba Kaizen”—continuous improvement—“where the action takes place.”


This excellent article discusses problem evaluation and its effect on a company’s core values. The article also addresses defining and setting a goal to be achieved and deciding on solutions.


Although this article is written for the executive and manager levels, the four steps to implementing continuous improvement plans can be applied at any level.


The authors of this article set out to find the key to Toyota’s success. This case study details how continuous improvement works at Toyota, whose production system has often been imitated, but whose quality has rarely been duplicated.