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Questions to Ask Before Launching a Continuous Improvement Program

Choosing to start a continuous improvement program seems like an easy decision to make. Who would argue with improving quality, increasing productivity or reducing waste? But before embarking on an initiative, leaders should carefully evaluate what the program will involve so they can prepare for success.

Why are you deploying a continuous improvement program?

In other words, what are you trying to accomplish? Do you want to become more competitive in the marketplace, improve safety or meet customer demands for improved performance? The continuous improvement program must be linked to your business goals. Doing so shapes what projects are selected, who gets trained, and the type of training and tools used.

How committed is the executive team? Are senior leaders designated as champions of the program? How much time, energy and resources are they prepared to devote to it? Continuous improvement deployments should be thought of as marathons, not sprints. It typically takes 12-24 months to get a program off the ground and gain a little traction. Will executives have the patience and stamina to see the initiative through for several years?

If you find that the answer to this question is qualitative and difficult to analyze, fill out the chart in Table 1. If more than half of responses are neutral or below, the probability of success is poor. Without strengthening change-management systems, it's unlikely to achieve the expected results. Think about how you can support the

need for change, such as by creating a sense of urgency. In addition, consider building a guiding coalition composed of people who share the vision.

Now, if more than half of responses are Neutral or above, the probability of success is better. You have some elements of cultural change that are moving the organization forward and other areas you need to work on. But beware: If commitment drops below the neutral zone, the change effort may be in jeopardy. Consider targeting that area for improvement by assessing and then working through any resistance with team-building techniques.

How should the continuous improvement program management team be set up?

At this point, decide whether the initiative should be structured as a separate group or integrated into daily business functions. Separate continuous improvement departments may be easier to launch, but they often end up with a lot of accountability and no authority. They could be perceived as unnecessary and easy to cut out. Moreover, continuous improvement programs that are detached from the business units often embody an us-versus-them attitude. On the other hand, integrated continuous improvement programs require more time, discipline and effort.

How ready is the organization?

Understanding your organization's readiness for launching a continuous improvement program determines the type of deployment, where you should focus your efforts, the level of resources required and the speed at which the initiative can be deployed. A readiness assessment scorecard is a simple but effective tool for objective assessment. (See Table 2.) List the key functions in your organization's value chain — or the functions within the organization that add value to the goods and services it sells — across the top of the scorecard. For each function, rank its performance on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, with regards to the following:

- process orientation, or the extent to which your organization has standard processes in place, those processes are documented, kept current and followed by employees.

MORE TO COME

Watch for further advice from author Peter J. Sherman, CSCP, about preparing for and implementing a successful continuous improvement program in the next "Operational Excellence."



Table 1: Executive team readiness assessment

QUESTION	STRONGLY DISAGREE		NEUTRAL		STRONGLY AGREE
	1	2	3	4	5
There are designated senior leaders who are the champions of change.					
These leaders have the time, passion and focus needed for change to happen.					
The reason for the change has been clearly articulated.					
Key players can, if asked, explain the reason for the change and why they support it.					
The desired outcome from the change is clear.					
Key players in the organization, if asked, can explain how the outcome will affect the organization as a whole and themselves as individuals.					

- problem-solving or decision-making skills, including the extent to which employees are properly defining problems to avoid bias; forming hypotheses; using disciplined root cause analyses to identify root causes; evaluating and weighing solutions; methodically implementing countermeasures, such as by testing one factor at a time; and measuring results
- data and analytics, especially how data is captured, stored and reported; being used to manage the business, such as through key performance indicators; and affecting the level of analytical modeling, regression analysis and forecasting.

The overall score at the bottom of each function is calculated by multiplying the

scores of the three criteria. The highest-scoring functions indicate where to concentrate your efforts, while the lowest-scoring criteria signify areas of weakness the program should address.

Do our workers support the initiative?

Changing organization culture is arguably one of the toughest challenges. It's relatively easy to provide tools and training for employees, but it is very difficult to make a continuous improvement program part of the way the organization does business. For that, you must garner employee support. Ask your frontline workers for their ideas. They will be more likely to support an initiative that directly improves their day-to-day activities. At launch, provide the tools, training, time

and other support needed to make improvements, but let frontline workers take responsibility. Celebrate and recognize accomplishments on a regular basis.

How are you going to define success?

People define success differently. To create your organization's definition, think about success in terms of the financial impact, quality levels, operational performance, customer satisfaction and culture change. Use time frames – short-, medium- and long-term – as another measure. For example, throughout the next six months, a company might expect 25 percent of its staff to go through Certified Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belt training and complete one small project that drives productivity, quality or safety. 📦

Table 2: Readiness assessment scorecard

CRITERIA	VALUE CHAIN									
	PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT	MARKETING	ENGINEERING	SALES	OPERATIONS	CUSTOMER SUPPORT	SUPPLY CHAIN	IT	FINANCE	HR
Process orientation										
Problem-solving/ decision-making skills										
Data/analytics										
OVERALL SCORE										