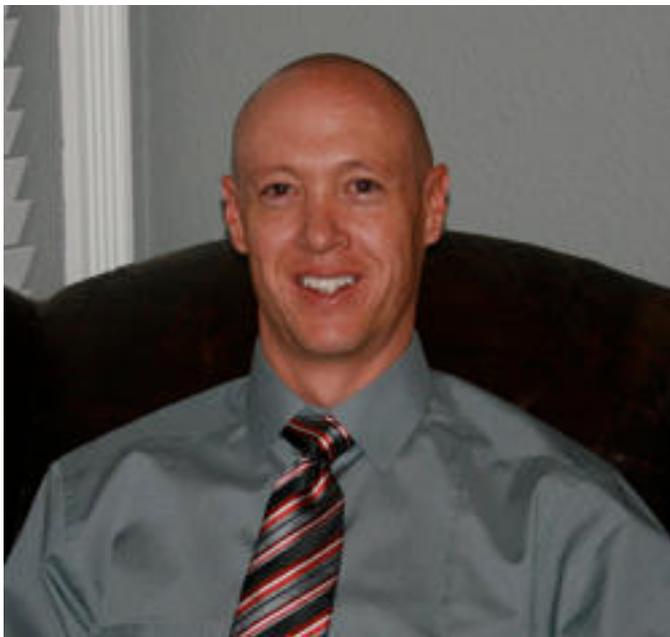


Why Everyone Should Understand Process Improvement

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Have you ever been directed to misuse process improvement methods? Perhaps you were directed to participate in a “Lean Event” to figure out how to shunt more work to excess resources. Maybe you were told to drop everything to “5S” the building because some VIP was paying a visit. Have you been told you need to participate in a Six Sigma project in order to meet a quota of process improvement activity?



Making best use of resources is good, but figuring out how isn't necessarily a Lean Event. Five-S is a good practice, but declaring an emergency just to clean up appearances for a visitor completely misses the intent. Quotas of activity do not necessarily beget improved performance.

Let's face it. Sometimes the biggest roadblocks to process improvement are people and their attitudes. Likewise, as much as we politely don't discuss it, sometimes the biggest sources of waste, especially in office environments, are not processes, but people and their expectations and demands and decisions.

Do you re-format engineering or quality data into a pretty dashboard for the management team? Wouldn't it be more efficient for the management team to learn to read well-formatted data in its original report or database?

There is an unfortunate and dangerous phenomenon that is common in many industries. Only some of the organization is trained in a process improvement methodology. Similarly, some members of the organization are given a severely truncated version of the education.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

The last phenomenon can be the most sinister. When, for example, our leadership teams are given only enough education in our process improvement methods to be able to speak the language, but not enough to truly appreciate the intent, the method, or the mission, roadblocks to success are disguised.

It's not easy to point your finger at the communication and understanding breakdown when everyone is fluently speaking the language. More importantly, it's not easy to talk candidly with someone who speaks the language and inform them that they are still operating outside of the culture. "Of course I know what I'm doing. I speak the jargon. I had my day of introduction training."

Here is the real example that, after I picked myself up off of the floor, inspired me to write today's post. It comes from a business unit and functional manager that are part of an organization with a custom-developed/evolved process improvement methodology that includes elements of Lean, Six Sigma, Total Quality and other good practices. I've reviewed the company's methodology and it is, in my opinion, a very valid one.

The business recently experienced a product review with the customer that went very poorly. Practically speaking, the readiness review that took place before the review with the customer failed to identify or cause to be corrected the many issues the customer found. The functional manager's solution was to declare a process change whereby they would not conduct a review to determine if the design and prototype were ready for the readiness review; a readiness review for the readiness review.

Yes, wipe the tears out of your eyes, stop shaking your head like a bobble-head doll, and take a moment to explain to your coworkers in neighboring cubicles why you are gasping with astonishment. It is real.

Unfortunately, it's not as uncommon as it should be. In many forms, all the time, as I tried to tease us about above, our peers and our leaders bombard us with wasteful decisions and demands.

The best defense against these wasteful requests is a deep and fundamental understanding of process improvement. When everyone in the organization truly understands the mission and method of process improvement these types of requests stop happening because the requestor automatically recognizes the problem. If they don't, if the waste created is subtler, we can still talk with the requestor, candidly and constructively, to explain the error without making it a personal battle of accusation, blame, or embarrassment.

The language and jargon of any specific process improvement methodology has an extraordinarily powerful weapon of behavioral guidance built in. The language unique to the methodology provides a politically correct means of pointing out how a request, demand, practice, or decision is costly, wasteful, or drives chaos without saying, "you did this." The language is used to focus the discussion on phenomenon, not a person, even when a person is the direct cause.

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Unfortunately, this brings up another aspect of process improvement education that many of us don't like to accept. The most important group of people in an organization to be deeply educated and proficient in process improvement is the leadership. What often happens, however, is that the leadership conspires to dodge this responsibility by pointing out that their time costs more than others' time and that others will be the ones primarily engaged in improving processes.

While there may be some reasonableness to the argument, process improvement is a cultural, behavioral change. The people most engaged in, wittingly or unwittingly, driving culture and behavior are the leaders. If they don't get it, the methodology fails.

Leaders, consider today's discussion very carefully. Do some honest introspection and consider if you need a better understanding of your process improvement methodology in order to enable or to inspire your personnel to engage it better and more successfully. If they are failing to succeed, it may be significantly due to your influence.

Those-who-are-lead, consider how you might help your leaders and influence them. Practice your discussion with your leaders in which you use the language of your methodology to point out the opportunity to do things more efficiently and effectively than the current expectation or request or demand.

Here are some generic examples:

- "Can we discuss how we can accomplish this task with 1 man-hour instead of 7 man-hours?"
- "I would like to propose how we can communicate this once instead of three times."
- "I have an idea how we can do this with less rework and processing."
- "I believe we can do this in a few minutes instead of a few days if we standardize a little bit more."
- "Would it be easier for everyone if this were done one way instead of several different ways?"

For the unfortunate leader in my real-life example above, we might say, "Would it be better to error-proof one readiness review instead of conducting two reviews? It would save us some valuable time, I think."

Yes, as much as we don't like to discuss it, except when we are complaining about our coworkers and leadership, people are perfectly capable of single-handedly generating waste, variation, chaos, and process faux pas. Let your methodology guide your own decisions and demands and requests so that you are not the source of performance challenges.

Use the language and techniques of your methodology to positively influence coworkers and leaders and politely point out when decisions and demands are

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inherently contrary to process improvement objectives or the mission. If you can influence your organization's plan for instituting and growing a process improvement methodology, be sure that the leadership is a paramount focus for training and proficiency development.

The best defense against people single-handedly compromising improvement and efficiency is to make sure that everyone in your organization is deeply steeped in the methodology. Create a habit of living by the principles of process improvement.

Stay wise, friends.

If you like what you just read, find more of Alan's thoughts at www.bizwizwithin.com
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