

## People – The Foundation of Continuous Improvement

In one of the other articles in this series, we explored what Continuous Improvement (CI) is and generally outlined the three critical components necessary for an organization to undertake a CI project: methodology; technology; and, people. If you visualize CI as a triangle, people are the base of the triangle with methodology and technology being the sides.

In this entry, we are going to explore the base: people.

Many organizations have invested great amounts of money in leading-, sometimes bleeding-edge, technology and have talked about implementing various methodologies. Whilst having information is absolutely critical to a CI initiative it is totally useless unless people know what to do with it and, more importantly, know how to improve with it. Information must be presented to a **knowledgeable** user in a format that allows for rapid decision-making.

Creating a knowledgeable user requires both training and professional development. Training is the process of teaching someone a skill set, or group of skill sets, to accomplish specific tasks (e.g. the use of a computer system or driving a fork lift). Professional development includes two elements: *education* and *personal development*. Education is defined as being the systematic study of problems, methods and theories relating to a subject or range of subjects while personal development is defined as having to do with the development of character, personality and conduct of the person. In order for a CI mentality to take hold, people need to become professionally developed and trained with the necessary skills and deportment to not only do the job but also think about the job that is being done and how it could be improved.

Under the educational portion of professional development, a CI organization would invest time and money in having subjects taught such as: Quality-At-Source; Problem Solving; Just-In-Time; Lead Time Reduction Techniques; Single Point Of Contact Service; Six Sigma; and, any other methodology that is contemplated as being useful to the achievement of corporate goals. This methodology education sometimes needs to precede the actual formulation of the CI project plan as organizations may not have prioritized or even determined the methods to be utilized in their plan.

Other educational initiatives such as certification in a body of knowledge must also be part of the overall plan. There are a number of professional organizations that have developed educational offerings that lead to professional certification (e.g. PMAC, PMI, APICS, etc.) in bodies of knowledge that are profession specific. In speaking various corporate officers I have found that there is a growing awareness that organizations need to have operations and information technology staff that have professional designations. After all, would any organization have a CFO that did not have an accounting designation? If not, then why would an organization appoint a materials manager without either a CPIM or CPP designation being a prerequisite?

The personal development of a professional is a more difficult task to accomplish. First, an organization must select people at the entry point to the organization: hiring. Two of the more important items to have before hiring someone are a detailed job description and a baseline personality profile. The job description should have the minimum



2368 Hargood Place  
Mississauga, Ontario  
Canada L5M 3G1

[info@e-mergingcommerce.com](mailto:info@e-mergingcommerce.com)

educational requirements for the position as well as the optimal educational profile. A person hired with the minimal requirements should have an agreed upon path and timeline to reach the optimal profile. The personality profile describes the types of personality required to fit into the team, position and organization as a whole. There are a number of tests that can be given to an individual to determine their personality traits and aptitude and the organizations that invest in these tests generally have excellent results in hiring and a lower-than-average turnover rate of employees.

An organization must be careful not to hire an over-qualified or over-experienced person for the position without probing the reasons for the person's application. These people may chafe at working for/with less experienced people or become bored with the position. However, there are some conditions under which a very experienced person may want a junior position (e.g. less stress as they move towards retirement). If the position and expectations are agreed upon by both parties this can be a very nice win-win situation for both employer and employee.

There is no doubt that people who are both educated and have a professional demeanor about them are going to get the most out of training on specific skill sets. These people will have many questions about the application of the skill set to the job at hand. They will want to know about the options of using the tool or skill in different ways. They will want to understand the sources of information and incoming workload and the impact that their work will have on others. In this manner they can apply their education to the job, develop higher skill sets and continuously look for ways to improve their functions.

Unfortunately, many organizations have traditionally cut educational and personnel development funding as part of their budget trimming process. These are the organizations that perceive these funds as expenses instead of investment. These will also be the organizations that fail to achieve the culture required for Continuous Improvement.

#### ***About the author***

*Ken Cowman has over 11 years experience working in operations management and over 26 years of management and enterprise solutions consulting experience. With over 25 years of executive management experience and 6,500 hours of education and seminar leadership experience, he has the experience to be able to view the organization from all levels and ability to provide the appropriate level of teaching and/or consulting to effectively assist organizations in their quest for continuous improvement.*