

Best Practice Series

Improve the Improvement Process

By Paul Deis

Summary:

In this article we will explore how to make sure your Education and Training (E&T) program supports the improvement of the improvement process (and people) itself, and as a result, moves the company towards the positive end of this spectrum.

- Education – key to Best Practices
- How to get the most value from your program.
- Improving your “improver-ers” – greatest leverage.

Once one understands the value of on-going (continuous) improvement processes, it may occur to you that upgrading the effectiveness of the improvement itself affords potentially huge leverage.

Our considerable experience with education and training programs strongly supports this view, while explaining why many E&T efforts produce little in the way of visible results.

The improvement spectrum runs from no improvement process at all through companies like Toyota. Most are somewhere between these two poles.

Education – Key to Best Practices

Why have an E&T program at all? Any continuous improvement team will eventually “run out of gas” at least to some extent. This is simply because of the inherent human tendency to settle into a stable way of perception. Waste in a process may be blindingly obvious to one person, yet completely invisible to another. Why? A difference in perceptions.

Similarly, one group of people may just accept a given quality level of a process as normal, acceptable, and not something any action could or should be taken. Another perception may regard the same process quality level as completely unacceptable and an occasion for high-priority action. Same cause – a difference in perceptions.

At the very leading edge of Best Practice generation are highly innovative companies who have mastered the improvement process, such as Toyota and Honda, who steadily generate new, never-seen-before ways of doing things. Honda, for example has an annual celebration for the most spectacular failure during the previous year. This sounds completely insane to many more traditionally minded managers, who think failure is to be identified and punished – the bigger the more severely. But who is gaining market share over whom in this industry?

Most of us must start from where we are – by study, internal growth, by putting more tried and true Best Practices into use – gained from education, case studies, benchmarking, hiring and other methods. Innovation, trial and error can be added to the mix at an appropriate time.

This learning takes the form of education and training. Done properly, on-going education provides the “fuel” for evolving, widening perception processes among improvement program participants, and provides specific, direct information about Best Practices that have a successful track record, and the thinking they are based on.

How to Get the Most Value from Education and Training

Your E&T program should generate a measurable return on investment, not just become part of some nebulous benefit to employees that essentially just increases indirect costs. So, how do we get this to happen?

The overarching key is to closely and integrally connect the E&T process to an effective continuous improvement process which utilizes what is taught.

Our view is that not having a continuous improvement program is a luxury your company cannot afford. If your company is not improving consistently over time, it is in essence, living on borrowed time. It is just a matter of time before a competitor or new entrant to your primary market pushes your company out. In the meantime, though, it can seem stable and comfortable – seducing management and employees into a complacent mind-set – until it’s too late.

We urge you to get started now to get an effective continuous improvement process under way in your company, and to provide the “fuel” for it with an effective, appropriate E&T program. These have the following characteristics:

- **Regular, on-going** – the E&T program has regularly scheduled sessions, with content appropriate to what the participants are working on. Someone at the company is responsible for managing the content, schedule and participants.
- **Part of everyone’s job** – professions such as nursing, real estate, CPA’s and many others require Continuing Education Units at specific levels. The same reasoning applies to everyone at your company as well, as nothing stands still in this world. Your people are either growing in their ability, or diminishing – smart money is on the growth path.
- **Small, incremental** – large, intensive seminars are occasionally appropriate. Generally, though, learning is best done in smaller, “digestible” increments. Ideally, a class is the “lecture” portion of the learning, while actual improvement and job work is the “lab.”
- **Closely related to current improvement efforts and work** – new conceptual education, or proficiency training in new tools or methods need to be reinforced by real-world use either concurrently with the courses, or very soon thereafter. Otherwise the learning is soon lost.
- **Distinguish between education and training** – course content should always be clearly understood as providing either new ideas, a new viewpoint, a case study of a similar company’s practice in a given area – which we term “education” from “how-to” work such as operation of a specific software function, or applying a technique such as statistical process control (SPC).
- **Practical, lecture and lab orientation** – the objective here is to produce improvements in the performance of the business. Accordingly, each section of content should be presented with how the learning will be applied kept in mind. This can be accomplished by “homework” questions or projects, by bringing the work content into discussion during the course itself or other ways. Otherwise, it’s just “info-tainment.”

Measure results – some form of measurement of relevancy and support for specific performance improvement goals should be maintained over time for all education and training content.

Properly done, an effective E&T program fuels the improvement process that will enable the company to not only just survive, but to prosper and grow over the long haul.

Greatest Leverage – Improve the “Improv-ers”

The most reliable way to improve performance is via a strong continuous improvement program – right? Well, with that in mind, consider the enormous leverage that comes from improving the improvement process itself. And how does one do this? By constantly upgrading the perceptions, knowledge, and skills of those who ARE the improvement process – the participants.

First, remember that the improvement process is only as good as the people participating in it. Secondly, bear in mind that it is very, very easy for heavy handed management to derail even the best improvement process. Teams with many successes can come to a complete halt when a new senior manager arrives who likes the “command and control” method, and hands out punishments to those who make mistakes, or worse, does so publicly.

In summary, then we can see clearly that it is only through a well integrated program of education, training, and “lab” or practical, real-world work that people become progressively more proficient at the improvement process itself. The process is both sturdy and resilient, yet fragile and very easy to stop or reduce.

Short-cutting or stepping on any aspect of the continuous improvement process in your company is like eating your seed corn – these are the seeds of future success, that must be planted, nurtured, and encouraged to reach full bloom over time. Education and training, as we have briefly summarized above, is the means by which an effective performance improvement process is itself improved over time, and works best in a context of supportive, wise leadership.