

## How did your company improve today?

**A company that doesn't try and do things better every day will soon fall behind.**

It's a nice feeling. You spend months, maybe years on a major project, an initiative that impacts virtually all of your staff or the product launch that sets you apart from the competition. You and your team have worked harder than you ever thought possible, but it was worth it, now you can relax a little and enjoy the success.

OK, we know it doesn't work like that, but that's the approach that virtually all companies take when it comes to the way that they manage day to day tasks. If you look at the work that your staff spends most of their time doing it is likely pretty much unchanged over the last year, maybe a lot longer. In some ways that might be a good thing – it allows for efficiency because your resources are familiar with what they do, and the processes are likely tried and tested – they work. But are they working as well as they can?

## The balance of consistency and evolution

Companies often fall into the comfort of the familiar – this is the way that we have always done things, and we know that it works. The problem of course is that the world is changing around you – customers constantly expect better value and improved timelines, office productivity tools progress at an ever accelerating rate, but your processes haven't changed – is that a good thing, or should you be looking to overhaul those processes?

I would suggest that if you stay on top of the way your business operates then you will rarely, if ever have to completely overhaul your work processes, rather you will evolve them slowly over time, almost without noticing. However you need to be careful – I'm all in favour of constantly improving the way that companies operate, but you need to understand the purpose of your processes. This might sound obvious, but it isn't always that clear cut.

Consider a food manufacturer. They are no different from any other business, they want to maximise revenue and minimise costs thereby generating as large a profit as possible. However they can't just streamline their production operations to be as efficient as possible – there is an obvious need for checks, safeguards, monitoring, etc. There are areas of any food manufacturing operation that add cost and time to the process, but the alternative is a potentially unsafe product.

That isn't to say that food manufacturers or similar businesses can't improve efficiency through streamlined processes – they can, but there is a need to fully understand the impact of those changes. They may result in increased risk, which may or may not be acceptable – if a check is in place that finds that one screw in 10,000 is not quite up to specifications is it a necessary check? Maybe not if the screw is going to be used on a car's cup holder, but what if that screw is going to be used on the trigger mechanism for that same car's air bag?

In reality the determination of whether a step in a process adds more value than the time and / or money that could be saved by removing that step is going to be a judgement call, my point is that you need to understand all of the reasons for the steps in a process before you streamline – the quickest way to cross the street is to run as fast as possible for the opposite sidewalk, but the risks may not make it an attractive option!

## The concept of continuous improvement

Process change is often seen as disruptive because it forces people to 'relearn' the way that they operate, and during the transition efficiency takes a hit. All of that is true – but in the majority of cases it is disruption that can be avoided. Process change is often delayed until it becomes unavoidable – something breaks down completely and there is no choice. I would suggest that it is much more efficient to embrace change, in fact make it a part of every day work. Rather than seeing work processes as the constant and the implementation of change as the shifting of that constant, incorporate change into everything you do.

No one knows your processes better than the people who implement them every day, and no one is in a better position to improve them. By encouraging your staff to make small changes to the way that they operate if it helps things run smoother you are empowering them to own their work. Your team feels a greater sense of ownership over their jobs, and they can hardly complain about the changes if they are the authors of that change.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that you should throw process out of the window and allow your staff to do things the way they want – think back to the risk vs. efficiency point above. Rather I am suggesting that you should allow your staff to identify improvements and implement changes that meet certain criteria. Face it – your staff are going to look for ways to do things quicker and easier anyway so wouldn't you want to capture that? There is an example of a production line at Toyota many years ago where a line worker moved a bucket of bolts from one side of his body to the other. No one told him to do it; he just found it easier because he didn't have to twist his body to pick up a bolt. Because of the time saving on every bolt and the number of bolts that he had to use on every shift the saving was huge. His supervisor recognised the opportunity, the change was implemented on every production line and Toyota saved millions of dollars a year.

Each individual change that you implement is likely small in magnitude – the buckets of bolts are few and far between, but that makes it easier to accept and incorporate, and the changes that you implement are more evolution than revolution. In this way the impact on the organisation's efficiency during the change is minimised, but over time the benefits can be dramatic.

### Moving to a culture of improvement

Reading the above, you might think that continuous improvement is easy to implement. That's partly true – it isn't difficult to capture the small changes that people will implement to try and streamline their work, what's difficult is to create a culture where people are always looking for ways to improve their work – never satisfied that the way things are done are as good as they can be. Implementing continuous improvement really is a cultural change. You need to empower your staff to not just own the work they do, but also the way that they do it, and that isn't always easy for staff to come to terms with. Continuous improvement is something that you have to introduce over time, letting people figure out for themselves the changes that will add benefit to the company as opposed to change just for the sake of change. Proposed changes still need to be reviewed and accepted before they can be implemented, and initially there may be more rejected than accepted as people adjust to what works.

The second challenge that you face when implementing continuous improvement is the tendency for staff to settle. Once a few changes have been implemented people become comfortable with the new way of doing things. It's easy to fall into a way of thinking that the new, improved processes are now as good as they can be and that it isn't necessary to keep looking for further improvement. That may be true on any given day, but success is dependent on your staff quickly adjusting to the changing business environment and looking for opportunities in every new or changing situation.

Of course formal process change initiatives aren't necessarily a thing of the past with continuous improvement, dramatic changes may still require major change initiatives – a new product line, a new store, etc, but continuous improvement is preventive medicine that saves you from the pain of major changes to your operations in the majority of situations.

Andy Jordan is President of Roffensian Consulting Inc. Roffensian has an experienced process improvement practice and are experts in helping companies develop and implement a continuous improvement culture that works for them. Learn more at [www.roffensian.com](http://www.roffensian.com) or contact Andy directly at [andy.jordan@roffensian.com](mailto:andy.jordan@roffensian.com).