

Top 3 ways to start your Continuous Improvement Program

The current economic downturn has affected various sectors, including some that were earlier thought to be recession-proof. Fierce competition and constantly changing circumstances compel every company to focus their energies on sustaining business and improving productivity. To overcome these challenges, some organizations have taken short-term measures such as restructuring or downsizing. However, such measures do not necessarily equate to success during a recession. If businesses are to prosper, they must find and implement real methods of improving quality to gain the competitive edge in a declining economy. One proven way to gain the all-important competitive edge is to embed a culture of continuous improvement in the organization.

Continuous improvement is a process-oriented approach to manage the business in which the processes are constantly evaluated and improved in the light of their efficiency, effectiveness, and flexibility. Implementation of continuous improvement methodologies can help companies sharpen their focus on customers and processes to minimize inefficiencies. With various methodologies and systems available in the market, selection of the right one is driven by the needs of the organization and its capacity to implement such strategies. Though there are many approaches to beginning a continuous improvement plan, few have proven successful over time:

1. Quality Circles - This concept incorporates small voluntary groups who are trained to identify, analyze and solve work-related problems, then present their solutions to the management team in order to improve performance of the organization and motivate employees. One of the tools commonly used for making the quality circles successful is process mapping. Process mapping is used to map new and existing processes in order to create insightful analysis. This analysis provides an objective view of each process, which, in doing so, helps illuminate the goals and output. With process maps, your employees can get the "big picture" and use it to plan a continuous improvement path.

2. Total Quality Management (TQM) - This is a management approach focused on ensuring quality of both processes and products. Amongst the various methods used to implement this approach, process improvement and information management are most valued. Improved information flow can be achieved through process mapping and electronic information management tools that enable real-time processes to be shared and analyzed with the relevant departments. This will improve the visibility of information in the organization and break down barriers between various departments - A key ingredient to TQM.

3. Increase Customer Focus – An increase in customer focus aims at creating a system that captures customer information, correspondence, purchase history and improves collaboration with customers. This information helps your customer service department or sales team identify and target the 'customer needs'. Consequently, improving the existing processes in these departments and enhancing the customer experience. Many organizations, for instance, go a long

way towards increasing customer focus, simply by ensuring that critical customer-related information is at the fingertips of their sales team. Only good quality customer service is likely to result in repeat purchases and positive referrals.

To stimulate change and make continuous improvement as an organization strategy, the management team also needs to be committed, as they are the ones who lead and inspire project teams. Each organization is dynamic in its behavior. Therefore, choosing the right mix of approaches to achieve your continuous improvement goal will depend on the capabilities and resources of the team.

Conclusion

Process mapping is a critical step in driving your continuous improvement plan throughout the organization. Process mapping tools like Allclear are designed to help you map and analyze key business processes and share these with the project teams. The first step to continuous improvement is visibility of information and intrinsically knowing what matters most to the bottom-line; process maps let you achieve all this quickly, simply and efficiently.

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