

The Need for Speed

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Publish date: October 2009 Superfactory www.superfactory.com
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One of the often underappreciated keys to a successful continuous improvement effort is getting off to a fast start. It is not a coincidence that in baseball the leadoff hitter is often very fast and a good base stealer. Baseball managers know that getting runners in scoring position early helps to build momentum and get runs on the board early. The same holds true in continuous improvement efforts.

Think of the projects that you have been associated with in the past that dragged on for months. Did you find yourself in long planning sessions? Was the team hesitant to implement until all the details had been flushed out and the perfect mousetrap created? When you finally did implement, did the plan come together exactly as scripted, or did you have to make adjustments along the way to get where you needed to go?

In my experience, speed is critical to your success on projects because of what it gains you. There are numerous benefits, but in particular I'd like to focus on four:

- Momentum in the Effort
- Early Wins on the Board
- Confidence for the Team
- Credibility to the Effort

Momentum in the Effort

Momentum in a project is critical. Inertia is one of those concepts we were taught in grammar school that has a lot of value in continuous improvement projects: "a body at rest stays at rest." I have been involved in projects in the past that stalled and could not get restarted. When I look back at them now, I realize that we had not gained momentum early and, therefore, were fighting an uphill battle the rest of the way. At some point, those initiatives went away because they stalled. These projects may be referred to as "flavors of the month."

Contrast those with the projects that have been successful, and I bet "a body in motion continues in motion" is a better description of that project. For example, with one client we were putting a tool crib in place. During the first day, we collected over 2,500 tool holders and had a skeleton layout in place. By the end of the first week, although not fully functional, we were already issuing tools out of the tool crib to operators on the floor. The project took off like a rocket, and we never looked back. Although there were hiccups along the way, the speed that we started with created such a tide of momentum that our team faced all challenges with an attitude that we could not be stopped. Once that boulder started rolling down the mountain, it was awfully hard to stop.

Early Wins on the Board

Early wins for your team are a natural by-product of speed. In the tool crib example, the visual change to the shop floor (removal of excess, cluttered tooling) and establishment of an organized area for issuing tools gained early wins for the team. People were able to see the results with their own eyes. The project began to get legs of its own. Everybody likes a winner; other people started to get on board and the effort continued to gain speed and momentum. I am not

downplaying the necessity for planning. However, planning sessions too often drag far longer than necessary. The longer it takes to get into implementation, the longer before you see results.

Confidence for the Team

Fast starts breed confidence. Teams feed off success; thus, the early wins bolster their confidence. My experience with teams and organizations has shown time and again that confidence is infectious. Employees get a taste of success and they want more of it. These groups no longer hope to win but are now conditioned to expect it. They are more equipped to face adversity head-on and beat it than teams that have not yet tasted success.

Credibility for the Effort

Credibility for the effort is built around all the previous points. Early wins and confidence build a reputation for the team involved and the effort as a whole. This credibility is important up the chain of command, as well as within the group of people that we are working with on the effort who may not be part of the core team. People are more apt to get engaged with projects where they are seeing results. Equally as important, when we are faced with new obstacles that present challenges, our past credibility will help people believe that we can overcome them. After all, our previous wins have already demonstrated our ability to do so.

How do you get off to a fast start? Here are some techniques and approaches that have proven to be very effective with the numerous clients who we have worked with over the years:

1. Trystorming
2. Measurements
3. Huddles
4. Physical Changes
5. Action Item Lists

Trystorming

Trystorming is at the core of what we do at Definity Partners. It is a key component of speed and gaining early momentum that is crucial to success. Everyone is familiar with brainstorming: getting a group of people together and throwing out ideas. The concept is great; unfortunately, it is the rare brainstorming session that generates actionable items. More often than not, you find yourself in another brainstorming session covering the same ground as the previous meeting. Trystorming takes brainstorming to the next level. It requires us to flush out the ideas for improvement and implement them quickly. Test the merits of the ideas, and then tweak them as required. By doing this, you begin to reap the benefits immediately. For example, trystorming an idea that gets you 50% towards your goal right off the bat translates to a 50% increase over what you are currently doing.

Measurements

Measurements drive behaviors and creating the right behaviors will get the results you are after. The best measures I have seen are real-time, easy to calculate and located in the area where you are making the improvements. A white board and a dry erase marker are great for these types of measurements. Let the people doing the work update the board routinely. This gives them ownership in the process and also provides real-time feedback about how they are doing.

Huddles

Huddles are a great tool that only requires commitment and time. When running huddles, I routinely cover three things: measurements, what went well and what went poorly. A good huddle will typically last a short time period, often under ten minutes, and the results can be extremely powerful. It keeps what you are doing at the forefront of your team's mind and, equally as important, how you are doing toward your stated goal. The discussion of what went well celebrates the successes of the team and highlights behaviors that we want to repeat. Discussions about what went poorly become the basis for creating the trystorming ideas that will take you to the next level.

Physical Changes

We have previously touched on what a powerful mechanism physical changes can be in energizing your effort and building that early momentum critical to long-term success. Most adults are visual creatures; therefore, visual improvements are an easy way to communicate that a change is occurring. Organizing a work area through 5S, setting up manufacturing cells and visual measurements in the focus area are all examples of physical changes that can be done quickly, in one week or less. The best projects that I have been involved with over the years have always had dynamic physical changes occur during the first couple of weeks.

Action Item Lists

Finally, action items provide a means of tracking progress and creating a roadmap to follow on the path of continuous improvement. I have seen hand-written sheets, white boards in war rooms, Excel spreadsheets and detailed project lists with gantt charts. The format is less important than documenting the items to be done. Ensure that you have the action item, responsible party and the date due. Do not allow TBDs; they are a recipe for disaster. Create a deadline and hold each other accountable to produce. Action item lists also provide a fantastic way to show the team where you have been and how much you have accomplished along the way.

Continuous improvement efforts are challenging under the best of circumstances. By following these simple but effective guidelines, you can ensure that you and your team get off to a fast start. Best of luck on your journey!