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HOW-TO GUIDE

Driving employee engagement on the CI journey

Introduction



Continuous improvement (CI) is not a project. It is a cultural change that must be embedded in the DNA of any world class manufacturing organisation striving for excellence. While the initial phase of a CI programme may include project-based activities to prove the value, CI doesn't stop once short-term improvement objectives have been achieved (otherwise it's not really continuous improvement).

Properly implemented, the initial activities and subsequent CI maturity should result in greater workforce engagement. The real challenge comes later – when interest in CI activities begins to wane. This guide offers six methods that can help you sustain your improvement drive and keep employees engaged when CI maturity levels out.

1. Making the CI process part of the plant's daily management system

While a bit harder to accomplish, establishing the desired culture requires that CI work becomes part of everyone's job. A good CI process and plan needs to incorporate improvement work into everyone's daily activities. **It's this constant reinforcement of the change vision that will help win over the minds and hearts of your people.**



Once the initial rollout has taken place, the next step is to merge the CI management process with the daily management of the plant. In other words, CI must be embedded in the rituals and routines that govern plant operations. One way to do this is to make CI a regular agenda item for all the various team and leadership meetings, from the shift starters and daily performance review meetings to the weekly and monthly plant leadership sessions.

When you make CI a routine part of the conversation, it becomes easier for your people to see how CI work directly impacts the operations environment. The key to sustaining the change is constant repetition: by linking daily plant activities to the change process, leaders and managers can make the change real and understandable for their teams.

2. Providing ongoing communication



As the CI programme matures, communication serves the purpose of building confidence in the initiative. Regular, consistent communication reassures your people that the path to the future state has been carefully mapped out. It also answers new questions that may arise and consolidates understanding of the various CI activities that are taking place.

Top Tips



Establish clear lines of communication at all levels within departments and interdepartmentally.



Make use of email, intranet, newsletters and noticeboards to get your message across.



Use visual management to track performance and bolster team morale, for example: post photos of employees who have been recognised for their achievements, and display line or team performance improvements, PIP savings and new ideas.

3. Provide coaching and training



Coaching and training sessions are opportunities to communicate your expectations to your team, develop their skills and encourage new behaviours. By building your employees' capabilities and competencies, you're ultimately helping them do their jobs better, and minimising the possibility of resistance to change. Training also reduces the fear of failure, which, in turn, builds confidence and helps teams tackle problems proactively.

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Top Tip

When it comes to sustaining CI, remember to add teamwork and change management to your training agenda. It's these 'soft skills' that will bring about the collaboration, commitment and initiative required for lasting change. By building your employees' capabilities and competencies, you're ultimately helping them do their jobs better.

4. Encourage participation and collaboration



Another way to foster engagement is to make your people feel like they are part of the solution. Make sure your team feels heard and that their ideas and contributions are valued; encourage them to get involved wherever they can. Participation creates a feeling of ownership in the organisation and also builds a sense of pride.

CI is a team effort, which means collaboration must be actively encouraged. On a day-to-day basis, collaboration drives problem-solving and sparks a greater sense of involvement and commitment. But collaboration is also the wellspring of ideas and innovation: regular brainstorming sessions will help your teams devise new ways of streamlining and refining processes, and give them a platform to work through challenges together.

Top Tip

Assign specific process improvement tasks to teams and give them deadlines to implement solutions. This will lay the foundation for a truly participative and collaborative environment.

5. Reward progress and recognise achievements



Rewarding progress is just as important as rewarding the achievement of long-term objectives. In fact, recognition of teams and individuals is a crucial catalyst for driving momentum of the CI programme. Recognition can be either formal or informal. Informal recognition occurs in the moment and is a powerful way to boost self-esteem. Formal recognition can take many forms, including gifts, vouchers and awards. Whatever form of recognition you choose, make sure that you commend the behaviours that led to the improved performance. Another reason why recognition is a powerful motivator is that it galvanises the team and encourages everyone to stay focused on the goal. It also provides the motivation to stay committed to the CI journey over the long term, rather than resist it.

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Top Tip

Publically congratulating employees on their achievements encourages the entire team to improve performance.

6. Show your support for the CI culture



To secure your team's commitment to the CI journey, you need to demonstrate that you fully support the new culture. Remember, what you say is just as important as what you do – you need to actively embrace the principles of lean and best practice and incorporate them into your daily routine. Reinforce positive signs of change as often as possible, and address any obstacles or resistance that might be impeding the CI initiative.

Top Tips

- Show your support for the culture change by going on regular gemba walks. These provide an opportunity to guide teams through the problem-solving process and help them develop greater autonomy.
- Keep reminding your team to challenge outmoded practices and constantly seek opportunities for improvement.

The great paradox

Even though this endeavour you've been working on to build a CI culture is commonly called a 'lean journey', the name is not entirely accurate. A journey implies an end. It is more like an adventure or an exploration. Regardless of what you call it, though, if you are successful at it you will eventually uncover the great paradox of creating a business management system that drives a CI culture: by definition, you can never finish building your system.

Because it is so focused on CI, the structure will not just uncover opportunities within your production and support processes, it will also identify ways to improve itself. This is the key characteristic of a mature implementation stage; the journey becomes self-powered. While there are still lessons to be learned in this stage, there is a noticeable change in the feel of the system. There is a significant reduction in the effort it takes to roll out new ideas and a major increase in the system's payoff.

Once your organisation reaches this point, the majority of your plants will be operating under the business management system, and should have a full CI calendar. Employees will be able to transfer throughout the company and immediately understand how the new department is run. The fact that everyone is involved, though, does not mean that you can coast on your previous efforts. It is very important to keep up the momentum.

The bottom line is that this is not exactly a steady state phase, as the improvement line should still be steep. It is more of the saturation phase where everyone is involved in CI, and the focus is on continually strengthening the culture. So keep it fresh and keep improving the system. Don't let it stagnate. Your competition is making improvements every day; evolving change has now become a way of life.





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