

Achievement Motivation and *Kaizen*

By Lawrence Holpp

Some people claim Japan's competitive advantage is a cultural or genetic phenomenon—that a U.S. company cannot successfully replicate the Japanese concept of kaizen, or constant improvement. But achievement-motivation training can create a kaizen-like consciousness that is entirely in keeping with American values and norms.

American industry has had to swallow no pill more bitter than that with "Made in Japan" stamped on it. The fact that much of the Japanese phenomenon can be attributed to the contributions of an American, Edwards Deming, only adds to the subsequent indigestion.

Despite the widely noted mimicry of the Japanese and their ability to enhance imported advice and technology, all of us who gawk at them share the perception that, to some degree, their accomplishments are a result of their culture, work ethic, homogeneity, and other intangibles that foster a never-say-die attitude of constant improvement. The Japanese, predictably, even have a word for it—*kaizen*.

Masaaki Imai, in his book, *Kaizen*, defines it as improvement. "Moreover," he says, "it means continuing improvement in personal life, home life, social life, and working life. When applied to the workplace, *kaizen* means continuing improvement involving everyone—managers and workers alike."

Kaizen, thus, is a cultural value that forms a substrate underlying the Japanese quality movement. The movement has become popular in America, at least since the NBC White Paper production called "If Japan

The idea of constant improvement is one of the trickiest concepts to sell to American managers

Can... "Why Can't We?" First seen in 1979, the program suggested that the secret of Japanese success started after World War II with the intervention of Deming and his statistical quality-control procedures. Since then, dozens of major companies have become converts to total quality, with its teams, problem-solving techniques, and never-ending prescriptions for management involvement, communication, and training.

My experience with total quality improvement, or TQI, has convinced me that a "Made in America" version of *kaizen* is ready to go to work to transform management-driven efforts at change into more participative and innovative bottom-up initiatives.

The Western phenomenon is not new. It's called achievement motivation, and it lies midway between academic learning and motivation theory, and the power of positive thinking. It's in keeping with the "American ethic," and can be trained and reinforced, using adult learning practices, to produce measurable results by fostering its own brand of *kaizen* culture.

Achievement motivation is linked with *kaizen* in several ways. Its developmental concepts and tactics can be integrated into existing organizational structures in the United States to create a spirit of constant improvement similar to the one that has been so successful in Japan.

The idea of constant improvement is one of the trickiest concepts to sell to American managers. In general, they don't seem to have a frame of reference to support it. In fact, the "good old work ethic," seems to boast counterprinciples, if there are such things, that define the limits of quality. Here are a few:

- "Don't mess with success."
- "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."
- "Leave well enough alone."

Such admonishments have become axiomatic in the American business culture.

I have often run into situations where a member of senior management will deliberately exclude one department or another from a quality-

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improvement effort because, "they're doing a great job; we don't want to mess with them."

That's a little like faith healing. No one can account for the success, so, rather than risk losing it to analysis, executives are content to cross their fingers and hope that the alchemy that spawned it will persist.

Time and the decline of our economy have proved them wrong.

Processes and techniques that go unexamined eventually deteriorate. Some are somehow sustained by hard work and attention to detail, but even those quickly become dated through product and process innovation by competitors. Henry Ford's maxim, "You can have any color you want as long as it's black," gave rise to the birth of General Motors and bright colors as options.

Today, of course, producers of goods and services cannot rest contentedly—even for a moment. Global competition has changed the nature of our

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economy and threatens to change the kind of thinking that says it's OK to rest on imaginary laurels. The spirit in the air says we must change or die.

But how new is that spirit that has come to our shores? As a quality consultant, I had been exposed to the Japanese version of TQI for some time before an eerie sort of *deja vu* began to possess me. Having read about *kaizen* and having seen the commitment of Japanese workers, I had the lingering feeling that I had, at least metaphorically, been around that block before.

That realization came to me recently as I tried to describe the importance of *kaizen* to a colleague well-versed in psychology but not in the esoterica of TQI. In describing how *kaizen* means a philosophy of never-ending improvement, a passion for making things better, I drew on an analogy familiar to us both. I said that *kaizen* was a lot like David McClelland's theory of achievement motivation.

He understood immediately what I

was talking about. I then went on to explain that a critical element is too often missing in TQI implementations in the United States. That missing ingredient is the *kaizen* philosophy of constant improvement, and the motivation it seems to arouse in workers in Japan and a few American companies.

"To excel oneself"

Achievement motivation was first named by Henry Murry. Murry's 1938

How Your Company Can

Here are some actions that organizations can take to develop the need for achievement in their people, even if they are not committed to TQI. These improvements introduce value-based changes that help people to do the kinds of things that develop and sustain the need for achievement and its benefits.

Each prescription is related to one or more nAch principles. By taking a two-pronged approach—directly training employees in achievement behaviors, and creating a climate like Blazer Radar's (see page 58)—organizations can begin to infuse domestically palatable cultures of *kaizen* into their employee-development efforts.

Principle 1—set goals of moderate difficulty

Remember, nAch goal setting is not MBO. It has nothing to do with strategic planning or performance appraisal. It is an internal personal quest for excellence. Organizations can reinforce, foster, and encourage it, but cannot institutionalize it.

Encourage the development of indicators and targets around all processes, not just sales or manufacturing. Improvement is possible in even the most esoteric research and development functions, and even in human resources, training, security, and maintenance.

Benchmark yourself against competitors. Xerox says it wants its quality program to equal that of Florida Power and Light, and its delivery systems to match those of Land's End, the mail-order clothing store. Even internal staff areas should strive to seek and match external competitors. What kind of an achievement is it to be the best

definition of the need for achievement (nAch in shorthand) is surprisingly similar to *kaizen*:

"To accomplish something difficult. To master, manipulate, or organize physical objects, human beings or ideas, to do this as rapidly and as independently as possible. To excel oneself."

But it took McClelland to demonstrate the importance of that particular drive for entrepreneurs, successful salespeople, inventors, and high

achievers. McClelland showed how the drive is associated with highly efficient, goal-directed individuals who scan the environment for improvement opportunities.

What do they wish to improve? Anything and everything.

McClelland's early work focused on small entrepreneurs who needed to concoct better mousetraps in order to stay in business. One characteristic he consistently identified in even the

most successful, for whom money had presumably ceased to be motivating, was the need to constantly tinker with a product or service to improve it, even when it was already adequate for the job.

McClelland, who at the time felt he had discovered the philosopher's stone of economic prosperity, also found that it was possible to develop that need and related behaviors in his businesspeople-subjects, through training

Develop an Achievement Philosophy

purchasing department in a company with only one purchasing department?

Treat all departments like sales. Without sales growth, most organizations know they will stagnate and eventually lose market share. Yet how many treat all functions like they treat sales, asking for higher forecasts and more aggressive goals quarter by quarter?

Learn how to set goals for both quantity and quality. Most organizations are already skilled at reducing anything to weights and measures, but it requires a special measure of creativity to set quality goals. Perfectly acceptable quality goals could include user or customer satisfaction, more useful or productive meetings, more aesthetic newsletters, more readable marketing proposals, training programs that are more stimulating and exciting, higher morale, more participation, and better suggestions from teams.

Learn to accept and value responsible failure. Recall that nAchievers set goals of moderate difficulty, and achieve them on the first try about half the time. That means that they often fail. Toleration for risk must become an organizational value, shown by example. A climate must be created so that "It's easy to get permission—and forgiveness."

Instead of spending a lot of time negotiating adversarial performance goals, focus attention on getting people to work the goal-setting process into their thinking, like nAchievers. Hold seminars in career development, where employees can learn the importance of setting personal goals to realize their ambitions and dreams. Goal setting in the work environment will be a natural

spillover of that effort.

Be prepared for change. Once employees start setting and pursuing achievement goals in an organization, there is no telling where they might wind up. That's why companies must often design structures to protect employees as they grow and change. Teams, for instance, should have charters that define limits but also make it OK to do things without having to get permission from management at each step.

Principle 2—facilitate feedback

Among the most frequent complaints heard in organizations is that made by employees about their managers, "I never find out how I'm doing until I screw up," and from managers, "They never tell me anything until I demand it." Those concerns are directly related. No feedback creates errors; spontaneous sharing of concerns can only come from balanced communication.

If managers are wary about giving feedback, almost nothing will make them do it. Create structures that ensure feedback on results to everyone. Every department should have control charts like those on the factory floor that measure whether processes conform to planned specifications. Goal achievement should not be subject to interpretation.

Establish a process to regularly measure customer needs. The importance of that idea is the number-one contribution of TQI. All day-to-day activities that people spend their time on in an organization should be linked to clearly established and valid customer requirements.

That does not mean the decep-

tive and limited kinds of consumer-preference assessment done by marketing, which measure relative liking for a few pre-conceived alternatives. Instead, get your customers involved directly in product development, whether they are individual end-user consumers or huge companies for whom you are but one tiny vendor.

By the way, too many people complain that they don't know who their customers are. The Japanese have a simple way of determining that. They would say that the customer is the next process. That means that everyone has customers, not just those who engage in transactions with outside clients.

Feedback on results is an exotic and rare commodity in most organizations, so companies may need to force it out of the woodwork. In one insurance company, the personnel group uses a form to solicit feedback each time it performs a service for an employee. Those forms become the principal input to the performance appraisals of personnel reps. With daily feedback, how you're doing becomes crystal clear. It also avoids costly and ambiguous attitude surveys.

Principle 3—let employees take responsibility for their work.

As long as bosses are the primary customers for the work of their people, the buck will stop there. In that traditional model, they fulfill the roles of line inspectors, evaluating product quality. In a TQI culture, the job of inspector is eliminated. Quality is everyone's responsibility.

Let workers negotiate the scope

Continued on page 56.

classes to help them focus their energies on acting and even thinking like entrepreneurs.

Developing the need for achievement

Perhaps the seeds for an American-style *kaizen* are already sown among us. Perhaps they are waiting to be nurtured with appropriate training in companies that already invest huge sums

on the promised savings and competitive advantages of TQI.

If so, McClelland and his colleagues have already laid the groundwork for developing the achievement motive through training.

McClelland found that achievement motivation is not evenly distributed like height or shoe size. Only 10 to 15 percent of the people he tested seemed to spontaneously demonstrate achievement behaviors. He also found the

characteristic to be relatively stable across different cultures. That challenges the notion of a genetic source for Japan's capacity to out-produce the United States in high-quality goods and services.

He identified four characteristics that his subjects with high nAch invariably demonstrated: goal setting, responsibility, the need for feedback, and high activity. The parallels are striking between those behaviors and

of their jobs—either product- or service-related—with their customers as well as their bosses. That puts the responsibility squarely where it belongs, on the shoulders of the employee. It fosters pride and commitment, since people only take pride in outcomes they can influence.

Commitment and competence are directly linked. If management wants to see employees acting committed and responsible, they must ensure that employees are thoroughly trained to do their jobs. One Japanese authority says quality begins and ends with education. That is not an overstatement. Companies with a serious commitment to TQI spend a fortune training their people. They get exactly what they deserve, trained people.

Moreover, they train people in skills they use most often. Lyman Styles, a communications consultant, points out that the amount of training we receive in reading, writing, public speaking, and listening is in exactly the reverse order of the frequency with which we use those skills. In other words, we listen and speak constantly, but few of us have ever taken academic courses in either area.

Evaluate results and processes. The idea that some Machiavellian figure can consistently produce good results by walking all over everyone is largely a myth. In an organization in which power and authority are shared, such individuals are quickly brought to their knees. That becomes dramatically clear when you envision an organization in which everyone is someone else's customer. You can't continue to burn customers and stay in business.

Individual and personal power is

an extension that idea. When someone is transformed from an employee to a customer, he or she suddenly experiences a net increase in power. On a variation of Lord Acton's famous statement, Rosabeth Moss Kanter says, "Powerlessness corrupts; absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely."

Principle 4—create an action-oriented culture

Following the first three principles will grease the skids for ideas; you'll have an action-oriented culture whether you want it or not. To really manage change, you have to anticipate it. Anticipated, managed change is perceived not as change, but as innovation. To sustain a TQI culture, you must create mechanisms for growing and harvesting ideas.

Establish work teams. Quality circles, at first seen as a panacea for all production and motivational concerns, won't solve systemic problems, but they're a start.

Most companies experienced a lull in their circle activity after two years or so. But those who hung in—establishing not circles, but work teams among professionals, managers, and blue-collar workers—found that the team concept was self-renewing and idea-producing. Give teams full responsibility for generating ideas and seeing them through to implementation. That way, you provide a structure that helps get managers out of the loop if they are still paranoid about "uppity workers".

Provide opportunities for legitimate pilot and trial-balloon activities. It's impossible to get good without practice, but employees have few opportunities for honest, low-threat experimentation. Re-

member the old maxim, "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly, rather than not at all." With effort, you'll only do it poorly once.

Through the years, some of my clients have tried to convince me that their organizations never make mistakes. They say of new training efforts, "Oh, we don't do pilots here. We have to get it right the first time." What arrogance! Who gets anything right the first, second, or even third time? You only get better; there is no right. That's what *kaizen* is all about. Slogans such as "Do it right the first time," are foolish and ignore the spirit of TQI and the concept of continual improvement.

Cut down on written proposals. A successful marketing organization always hired new assistant product directors with two years of experience and MBAs from top schools. Once hired, they were stuck in cubbyholes and set to writing and re-writing proposals. Their proposals were returned again and again with minute edits. It drove them crazy; many of the best quit. The philosophy behind it was acculturation. I couldn't believe it when the vice-president of marketing explained the system to me: "I had to do it," he said, "so they have to do it."

No proposal is perfect, and action has no substitute. Writing about a new-product launch teaches you how to write about new-product launches, not how to launch new products. By scaling down proposals, proposal time, and pilots, you can do more of everything and truly gain experience through action.

Create a real suggestion system. Many organizations set up paid suggestion systems with no clear idea of why they are doing so. Most are conceived by personnel executives

behaviors of employees in successful quality-improvement programs.

Goal Setting

Individuals with high nAch tend to set goals. They seem to do it automatically, without being taught. Sometimes they do it in their heads; more often, they write down their goals. Surprisingly, their goals tend not to be shoot-for-the-moon fantasies of the "some-day I'll be president" variety, but goals

who hear that their colleagues in other organizations are doing it, and don't want to be left behind.

Some suggestion systems are set up to tap into the high-end schemes of a few scientists and engineers who might otherwise conceal their major technological ideas and take them elsewhere. They give big rewards for one or two sophisticated proposals, while receiving hundreds of unsophisticated ones such as, "buy a water cooler."

Japanese suggestion systems provide little if any reward. Company presidents give out pens or lapel pins for all suggestions equally. That may seem parsimonious, but Japanese companies regularly receive five to 10 times as many suggestions as their American counterparts. Why? Because suggestions in Japanese companies are acted upon. Even little ones. Also, the suggestion process stresses incremental, improvement-oriented suggestions, not big, "breakthrough" ideas. Once again, *kaizen* is in action.

Whether an organization is interested in adopting a TQI philosophy and problem-solving process, or merely in getting its people to take a more active role in managing their own careers, achievement motivation provides a roadmap.

By applying selected tactics that have been shown to build achievement motivation in people in an organizational setting, change agents can work their magic in three ways:

- Empower people to manage themselves and take responsibility for their own actions and results.
- Begin to foster a climate of achievement in which action, initiative, and risk are sanctioned.
- Produce leaders who facilitate achievement on the part of their followers, not inhibit it.

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of moderate difficulty which, on average, they have about a 50 percent chance of hitting on the first shot. That gives them a realistic target that they can probably achieve, but not without a degree of risk.

Like *kaizen*, which emphasizes continuous incremental improvement, achievement goal setting is not of the "breakthrough" variety. Instead, it stresses a philosophy and set of behaviors that seek to modify everything for improvement, even things that already work perfectly well.

Lee Saylor, who first managed Chick Shue—who is now vice-president of sales at Digital Equipment Corporation—told me that when they sat down to their initial coaching session, he asked Shue, "Where do you want to go?" Shue said that he had a plan, which he laid out for Saylor, to be vice-president of sales in 10 years. Saylor agreed to help because, as he said, "The guy had a realistic plan. He didn't say three years, or five years, but 10. I thought he had a chance."

Responsibility

Individuals high in the need for achievement like to take responsibility for their actions. They gravitate to jobs that allow them maximum control over the means of attaining their goals. Such high achievers would be successful in a participative quality culture where quality was a performance standard and where it was possible, figuratively or literally, to shut down the line for a quality problem.

Feedback on Results

High-nAch types show a preference for work activities in which they are given constant feedback on performance. They love to know the score, how they are doing. Consequently, McClelland claimed, you would be likely to find such performers among the ranks of entrepreneurs and salespeople.

The need for feedback is one of the most important elements of any TQI program. No feedback could be more detailed, specific, and current than the control charts that hang prominently on the office walls and factory bulletin boards of companies engaged in total quality improvement efforts.

Activity

A high need for achievement fosters activity. That activity lends itself to such things as the development of new

ideas, and to experiments, pilots, launches, new methods, and improvements—all the sorts of activities associated with healthy quality-improvement programs. Achievement-oriented individuals have high energy levels, which give them the emotional juices to maintain their pace. Perhaps that's the relationship between Japanese group singing and calisthenics and the team spirit seen in successful American implementations.

Building achievement motivation

McClelland quickly found that he could coax achievement thinking and behavior out of people with the right training. Using visualization techniques, he got them to think like

Focusing on the flash of the final product ignores the incremental process that brought it about

achievers. Next, he helped them acquire new behaviors through more proactive planning and goal setting in their own businesses. He used simulations, case studies, guided imagery, and role-plays to train his students.

One technique McClelland used was to have students look at black-and-white drawings of people interacting in ordinary situations. He asked them to write 300 to 500 words about what they thought was happening in the pictures. Their stories were then "scored" for nAch content, characterized by references to accomplishment, improvement, discovery, success, overcoming tough odds, hard work followed by just rewards, and so forth.

High scorers not only thought like achievers, McClelland claimed, but also tended to spontaneously set goals of moderate difficulty, seek opportunities for continual improvement, and demand feedback. In other words, they fit the behavioral profile of the individual with high nAch.

McClelland also had his students play a ring-toss game. The directions were simple; they had three rope rings and three chances. They could stand wherever they wanted, with the objective being to "do the best job they could." Most hovered over the peg and

dropped the rings error-free. A few took wild chances, playing for laughs, from the far ends of the room.

But a fairly stable number, 10 to 15 percent, tried their skill with the first ring, then, depending on whether they made the shot, reset their distance for optimal performance on the next two throws. For that group, high in nAch, the "best job" meant a challenge of moderate difficulty that would improve their skills.

Like those achievers, workers in many Japanese factories, following the principles of *kaizen*, are slowly trained in their jobs. They set goals of moderate difficulty and are eventually successful.

Kaizen—constant, never-ending improvement—is, for the Japanese, the organizational analogue of the American genius or entrepreneur myth of the Edisons, Bells, and Wozniaks, working alone, persevering through trial and error, and finally producing magic with a dollar sign connected to it.

But focusing on the flash of the final product ignores the incremental process that brought it about. At Ford, the Taurus Project, which produced a best-selling, high-quality car, was a model of incremental improvement. Ford used statistical quality-control techniques, as well as a shared-responsibility team approach that combined input from hourly workers, customers, sales and marketing staff, and design engineers. The result was a product with both flash and quality.

Linking achievement behaviors, organizational climate, and leadership

An organizational climate that fosters achievement motivation can directly affect productivity. A study in the mid-sixties by researchers George Litwin and Robert Stringer at the Harvard Business School illustrates that point.

Litwin and Stringer created three experimental organizations based on McClelland's work. The "companies," Blazer Radar, Balance Radar, and British Radar, simulated cultures high in achievement, affiliation, and power, respectively. The companies went through several production runs, and Blazer—the company with the achievement culture—nearly always won. The situations were filmed, and comments like, "We try to sustain high standards," and "We are always trying

to do a better job," were common among Blazer employees.

Leadership was either praised in the companies for helping to create and sustain the climate of achievement, or criticized—in the case of British Radar, the "power" company—for being secretive and controlling.

As pundits of quality on both sides of the Pacific have told us, management is responsible for working on the system; workers are responsible for improving their work. Perhaps 85 percent of quality problems can be laid at the doorstep of management.

We already know a lot about establishing a climate of quality improvement. Crosby, Deming, Juran, and many others have spelled out the principles. Many Japanese companies and some U.S. organizations such as Florida Power and Light, Ford, Milliken, IBM, and Digital are trying hard to implement them.

Yet, motivational incentives, supervisory behavior and training, career-development options, and self-improvement opportunities remain traditional and stagnant, even in organizations that are working on quality improvement. The lack of change in those areas reflects a lack of faith, either in quality improvement or *kaizen*, or in the ability of line workers to really act independently.

In the traditionalist organizational cultures of the fifties and sixties, when McClelland did most of his research, individuals with high nAch had little place. It was the age of American ascendancy and built-in obsolescence. Why fix things when you could always buy a new model? Why improve the processes when rework was a legitimate occupation protected by union contracts?

The major American corporations were oriented toward tight financial and strategic control, loyalty, and acquiescence to authority. McClelland would have labeled them high in the need for power, and perhaps affiliation, but certainly not achievement. At that time, he was right in seeking his nAchievers in small businesses, beyond the gray walls of corporate campuses.

Now, with the de-centralized, de-layered, de-regulated, spun-off, mini, boutique, franchised, service-oriented, value-added, niched, and specialized kaleidoscope of corporate transformations we are witnessing, the time for the inside entrepreneur may have returned. And nowhere should that

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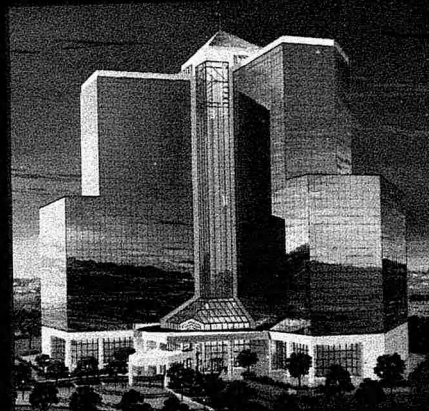
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return be greeted more openly than in companies committed to TQI.

How to take action

In the United States today, many approaches are being taken to problem solving and decision making. Some originated here, while others, such as

For More Information

The best way to understand all the ramifications of *kaizen* is to read Masaaki Imai's book, *Kaizen, the Key to Japan's Competitive Success*. It was published by Random House in 1986, and is probably the most readable book by a Japanese writer about quality improvement and Japanese methods.

Another translated book that reads less well but really gets into the nitty-gritty of implementation is *What is Total Quality Control, the Japanese Way*. It was written by Kaoru Ishikawa, the grandfather of the movement, and published by Prentice-Hall in 1985.

An excellent text by one of Deming's students—William W. Scherkenback, who was head of quality assurance at Ford—is called *The Deming Route to Quality and Productivity*, and was published by Mercury Press in 1986. Scherkenback reviews Deming's famous 14 points with clear, convincing examples. He also makes a good argument as to why most performance-appraisal systems don't make much statistical sense.

Tom Peters has raised to new levels the concept of the customer in *Thriving on Chaos*, published by Knopf in 1988. It is a wonderful source of ideas and examples from some of America's most quality-conscious companies.

Finally, I cite my own work on David McClelland: from *Training*, "Enhancing Skills Acquisition Through Achievement Motivation" (June 1980); and from the *Training & Development Journal*, "Realizing the Possibilities" (September 1988). Both articles include suggestions for goal setting and getting feedback; they describe work done in business settings to implement achievement thinking and creative approaches to adopting new management philosophies.

quality circles and *kaizen* teams, have come to us from the Japanese. Most processes use some form of the seven quality-circle tools: pareto diagrams (a kind of bar graph that helps pinpoint problem areas), cause and effect analyses, stratification (a process that helps divide data in ways that will make them more meaningful), checksheets, histograms, scatter diagrams, and control charts to ferret out and control process variation.

Those tools are crucial for getting to the root causes of complex, often repetitive problems that have no readily identified solution. Indeed, many organizations already have such processes in place to ensure quality and to monitor process variation.

But many problems don't require rigorous use of the seven tools. Some can be easily solved by employees at every level who are willing to take risks, make innovative changes, and seek to improve their productivity and quality every day. The process of constant improvement must be stimulated by management and by the organizational culture of the company. That helps employees learn new skills and encourages employees to use those skills to take action.

In order to achieve those goals, employees need to consider three distinct skill building areas:

- taking a systematic look at jobs to determine effective and ineffective behaviors;
- taking action individually or as a team to improve quality, productivity, or customer satisfaction;
- using an action-planning process to make sure actions are successfully implemented.

Taking action to foster a spirit of constant improvement at work requires employees to do the following:

- develop a bias for action through adopting action orientations toward their lives and work;
- handle obstacles to action;
- apply a set of action steps to solving common work-related problems;
- implement action plans;
- track and monitor their action strategies;

As they learn to take a creative new look at their jobs, employees need to learn how to

- identify the key resources they use in producing goods and services;
- work as a group to identify the unwanted inputs and outputs of their jobs (a detailed discussion of job inputs

and outputs follows);

- select areas of opportunity for correcting those unwanted inputs and outputs, or enhancing the way things are done;
- implement an action plan for taking action to improve.

Taking a new look at your job

No one is in a better position to improve a job than the person who does that job day after day. Think about all the little things you've done to make your work better. They may have seemed minor at the time, but in total, they may have made a major difference in your productivity and personal satisfaction.

You were able to make those improvements to your job because you are more familiar than anyone else with the work activities or process of the job. Whether you operate a computer or a fork-lift, the work process is much the same. That's because all work is organized to make the maximum use of inputs such as materials and supplies, in order to produce outputs such as products and services.

The inputs may be things like raw materials, paper, chemicals, steel ore, unsorted information, ideas, and concepts. An output can be a finished product such as an automobile rolling off the production line, a component such as a motor housing, a rough draft of a proposal, or the artwork for a magazine ad.

The concept of inputs and outputs may help you take the first step in looking at your job in a new way. If you have a clear, "big picture" understanding of your job's inputs and outputs, you will be better able to identify opportunities for improving your work; that is, for getting the same or better results without more effort or cost, while increasing your satisfaction through the knowledge that your ideas are making important contributions to the way things are done.

To better explain the concept of inputs and outputs, let's start with the idea that we bring resources (inputs) to our work location or work process. Then we improve or change those inputs before sending them on to the next process (outputs).

Inputs

Inputs are all the instructions or work orders—or "customer needs," as they are sometimes called—along with

all the resources and raw materials you need to do your job.

Let's say you get a work order or instructions from your boss, a customer, or someone in another department who needs something from you. Whether that work order is oral or in writing, it may instruct you to fix, find, change, build, repair, edit, check, or perform some other operation.

Once you know what to do, you can set about getting the resources you need. Those resources may be in the form of parts, raw materials, or information. You may also have to assemble tools and diagrams, get help from co-workers, schedule your own time, and schedule computer or machine time.

Once you have assembled your resources and are clear about your instructions, you can start doing your work. Your work is a process. What you do in that process is meet your customer's needs, add value to your resources, and create a product that others will want. For example, a mechanic changes the spark plugs in a car, a secretary converts a hand-written document into neatly typed pages, a technician checks the circuits in an IC board, and a welder attaches a flange to a steel disk.

As they perform their work, they all use direct resources: electrical power, tools, paper, and spark plugs. In addition, they use indirect resources, such as the building services that supply their processing areas with light, heat, air conditioning, and a space to work in.

When the work is complete, it passes to the next process, perhaps another work station, where additional changes and additions are made. If the work is complete after it leaves one process, it may return to its source—the boss, for example—or be shipped to the customer. Regardless of what you pass along or who gets it, your finished product is called your output.

Outputs

Outputs are the goods or services produced in a process. While many processes turn out finished products, others, like production lines, add something to a finished product in stages. The final product is the sum of many operations and the work of many processes. In an efficient operation, each stage, no matter how small, is important, because each adds value to the final product.

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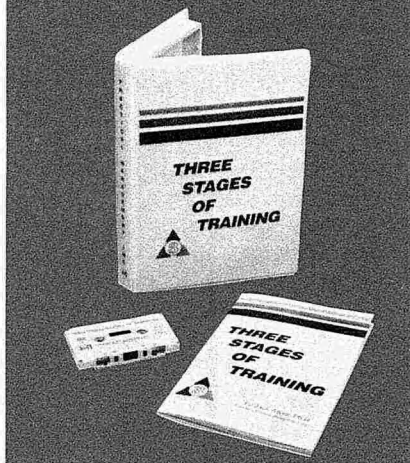
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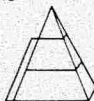
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We can better understand the idea of inputs and outputs if we look at them in the context of some familiar jobs.

- For a mail carrier, satisfactory input would include correct zip codes. Satisfactory output would be on-time, correct delivery of the mail.

- A construction crew's input includes tools, plans, and wood. Its output is an approved, sound structure.

- For a quarterback, input means play strategies; the desired output is completed passes.

- A successful taxi driver's input comes in the form of fares and directions. The driver's output is the correct destination and a tip.

- For a salesperson, input consists of leads; output, of course, is sales.

In each of those examples, the inputs are simple and basic. Both the inputs and outputs represent desirable or satisfactory situations.

The real world

In the real world, things don't always work smoothly. At times, the information you need for your work is wrong or incomplete; the parts don't meet your specifications; the raw materials are the wrong size, color, or shape; or you have too much or too little of them. Perhaps the partly finished work you receive from another process is incomplete or faulty, and you can't use it.

By the same token, you may be putting out a product that is out of spec or unusable for some reason. Work like that may be rejected by the customer.

Those flawed materials and services are called unsatisfactory inputs and outputs.

Unsatisfactory inputs and outputs can drive out satisfactory inputs and outputs by using up time and resources. So it stands to reason that if you can reduce or eliminate the unsatisfactory ones, you can work more efficiently and either produce more work, or increase the quality of your outputs. If you could improve your process to reduce or eliminate unsatisfactory outputs, your quality and productivity would increase and your customers would be more satisfied.

By setting goals for improvement, seeking feedback, and taking responsibility for change, employees can have a dramatic impact on the socio-technical design of their work. In doing so, they can eliminate unwanted inputs and outputs and improve their processes.

Transforming work

Several approaches can help increase productivity and improve quality. One approach, the input and output concept, can help you understand how your job process works. Learn to see your job as a link alongside a chain of other jobs that extend from vendors to customers. That perspective may help you identify and eliminate unwanted inputs and outputs.

To go beyond simple improvements, a fundamentally different approach is needed. Eliminating unwanted or unsatisfactory outcomes is not enough. A classic example is the buggy-whip manufacturer who made the finest buggy whip in the world, free of

A buggy-whip manufacturer made the finest buggy whip in the world. Unfortunately for him, he was making buggy whips at about the same time that Henry Ford was coming out with the Model T

unsatisfactory outputs. Unfortunately for him, he was making buggy whips at about the same time that Henry Ford was coming out with the Model T.

Transforming work means changing the ways we do ordinary things. For instance, in one structural steel production facility, cutting, drilling, welding, and initial assembly were done in different locations. While the steel was waiting to be moved from one place to another, it would often rust and have to be cleaned again and again. Only when someone thought to put the operations side by side, in a cluster, were the rust and wasted transport time eliminated. Here are some familiar examples:

- Work teams in which members are cross-trained to do different jobs, eliminating down time and the need for a lot of job classifications.

- Use of new technology such as computers and robots to do tedious or dangerous work—or, in some cases, to do work more thoroughly or accurately than possible with human hands.

- A manufacturing process in which inventory is not stored in huge, expen-

sive warehouses gathering dust, but delivered to the work station just as it is needed.

■ New ways of working that empower employees to shut down the line when things are going wrong, or reject a product for quality problems before it ever reaches final inspection.

Step-by-step improvement

You've already taken the first step toward improving your work, by analyzing your job for unwanted inputs and outputs and eliminating those jobs and products that fail to meet either your own or the customer's expectations. Using the input and output concept, you can eliminate waste, increase quality, and improve the efficiency of your operation.

In order to take the next step in improving your work, you will be looking at the components or resources that enable you to create products and services in the first place. To some extent, you have already identified many of them: equipment, raw materials, information, energy and labor, and financial resources such as working capital.

Resource areas are important to consider because they help break a job into manageable components that can be improved upon one at a time. When a resource loss is uncovered, like an unwanted input, it can be fixed and the work restructured. But many resources have more uses than originally intended.

One company, for instance, used to spend a lot of money removing shrink wrap from incoming deliveries. The bundles of shrink wrap were packed in costly dumpsters, and hauled off at additional cost. A transformation happened when a bright employee looked at the shrink wrap being thrown out and said, "There must be a better way." There was. Now, those tons of shrink wrap are being shredded and used as packing material in another part of the plant. The cost savings were significant, but the idea of transforming an unwanted output of one operation into a desirable input of another was revolutionary.

Taking effective action means more than just staying where you are. It means moving ahead, getting better, developing, and growing. In a sense, if you don't take action to advance, you may find yourself not only being left behind, but even losing ground.



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