

The process of improvement is a key component in the long-term success of any organisation. One of the main ways an organisation can deliver meaningful and sustainable change is through the engagement of its employees in identifying and delivering incremental improvements.

Employees represent the vast majority of experiences that an organisation possesses. This pool of knowledge offers not only the potential to identify improvement but also the experience to perfect suggested improvements and sift out those that just won't deliver any value.

About TalkFreely

TalkFreely provides an on-demand solution for driving improvement and innovation. Through the use of social networking techniques, it ensures that organisations are able to broaden and sustain the engagement of its employees and customers in the process of improvement. This approach enables organisations to utilise and benefit from the collective experience and knowledge of these stakeholders.

TalkFreely is a hosted web based solution that can be immediately deployed and uses email, voicemail, SMS and web as methods by which people can contribute.

TalkFreely Benefits

- Engages both customers and employees in the process of innovation and improvement
- Ideas can be collectively rated /discussed/improved
- Pre-configured yet customisable improvement management
- Integrates easily into existing websites
- Submissions can be made by email, web, phone or SMS
- Create multiple channels that engage different target groups
- Fully managed web based solution
- No need for new hardware or software installation
- Ready for immediate deployment



Managing improvement

For such an important process it is rare to find formal approaches that manage and control the process of improvement from suggestion to delivery. All too often it is left to the 'normal communications' channels to deal with any suggestion, with an expectation that it will be implemented only if it is good enough. Unfortunately this approach does not offer the control that is needed to sustain improvements, nor the formal recognition of those ideas that deliver improvements and those that won't.

Organisations have the capacity to make hundreds of incremental improvements each week.. Recognising and celebrating these improvements not only delivers real value, but creates momentum. Without formal management of this process, an organisation is unable to realise its full potential.

Why engage employees in improvement?

The question might seem a bit daft, but it is worth trying to pin this one down. Perhaps another way to look at this is to ask the question 'what have our employees got to offer?' The answer is simple: your employees are where the bulk of the experiences and knowledge lie within your organisation. This experience has the potential to provide insights into how an organisation can improve; how a good improvement can be made great; and finally identify those suggestions and ideas that might look promising but just won't work.

If you don't engage employees, you cut off this resource of experience and insight and you are just as likely to lose their support and the commitment that is necessary for change to occur.

Engagement is not just ideas

If your answer to getting people involved in improvement is simply getting them to generate ideas, you should expect to achieve a limited level of engagement. Ideas typically come from a subset of employees, and usually those employees are happy to provide multiple submissions. This behaviour is unsurprising if you reflect on Belbin's research into team roles – an effective team is made up of a diverse skills base, and typically only a few of its members are 'ideas' people.

The value from the rest of the team comes from their ability to refine and qualify any ideas that have been suggested.

Therefore all your employees have a part to play in the process of improvement, and by engaging them in sifting and refining ideas demonstrates that it isn't just those who make suggestions who can contribute to change.

Finally, suggestions don't deliver value in themselves. The collection of potential improvements is simply the first step in the improvement process. It is only when the best improvements are identified and then delivered that can you claim success.

'If you focus purely on the submission of ideas, the implication is that those people without ideas have no role to play in improvement. This quite simply is incorrect'

The capacity to deliver improvement

Due to the everyday demands of 'business as usual', your organisation will only have a limited capacity to implement improvements. As such it is important that you use that capacity wisely. If you have encouraged people to give any idea, no matter how big or small, you will no doubt end up with lots of ideas. Yet having lots of ideas in the process is not necessarily a good thing, because:

- great ideas in the wrong areas can be disruptive
- the more ideas you get, the more time and money is spent in qualification
- the longer the qualification period, the longer the lead time to delivery.

To deliver ongoing improvement, the lead time from suggestion to delivery must be kept to a minimum. To address this it is important that you focus employees not only on suggesting improvements but also on the sifting and shaping process. This in turn delivers the best qualified ideas while engaging all employees in the route to improvement.

Transformation or incremental improvement?

Organisations are typically subject to at least one major project of transformation at any one time. These large programmes normally represent a sizeable investment of time and money and as such are carefully planned, closely managed, and carry a high level of expectation.

By applying the same rigour to the process of managing incremental improvement, you create the potential to deliver real and substantial value. The improvements managed within this process typically come at a lower cost; have a lower risk of failure; and deliver a more immediate return on investment.

The improvement process – from suggestion to delivery

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Like any key process within an organisation, the improvement process must be fit for purpose, robust and managed. To ensure the path to incremental change is properly managed, you need to have end-to-end visibility and control of the process.

This should include:

- 1 Collecting improvement suggestions
- 2 Robust qualification of ideas
- 3 Engaging employees in shaping and sifting to identify the best ideas
- 4 Allocating the best improvements to the right people
- 5 Ensuring timely and effective delivery
- 6 Reporting and recognising success.



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