From Continuous Improvement to Organisational Learning

Have you ever noticed how beguiling are those numerous ‘Temples’ of Continuous Improvement that litter the text books of Lean Thinking? They seem at once to explain everything and yet nothing; the metaphor makes sense, you like the idea of building Lean on a solid platform and of having pillars that support the edifice further; but what do you actually do to make this temple a dynamic reality?

by Kevin Eyre
From Continuous Improvement...

Sustainable Continuous Improvement – Integration

For those of you who are keen to do more than merely worship at the foothills of someone else’s creation, we’ve decomposed a few of these static models and created a way of understanding Continuous Improvement. This might help you to see the dynamics of Lean implementation – your very own ‘Tom Tom’ – able to re-direct you when you (naturally and inevitably) take a wrong turn!

A system of Continuous Improvement

Continuous Improvement operates well where stable operations are in place. Stable does not, of course, mean static. A stable operation is one in which demand is classified and managed to customer takt time, where the workplace is organised and visual, where standard work is in place and where ‘flow’ is a reality. Such operational conditions – often hard won – naturally expose deviations from process at source, so creating the many small crises that are the target for continuous improvement.

Where problems or deviations are detected at source, they require immediate problem solving. In CI environments, front line staff are accountable for and skilled in identifying and resolving problems as they occur. Resolution is sought in minutes and hours, seldom in days. A consistent set of problem solving tools and clearly defined processes are mandated and used by the organisation. Where problems are solved and changes made, the resulting improvements enable the CI system to stabilise, but at a higher level of performance than existed before.

This is Continuous Improvement – rigorously establishing stability whilst relentlessly detecting and eliminating problems at source.

It is people, working in well designed processes, being creative and disciplined, and improving those processes further, that achieves this outcome.

Continuous Improvement – Stability

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A system of Discontinuous Improvement

Establishing and nurturing a system of Continuous improvement is a management issue; the CI system needs to be protected but it also needs to be connected to the demands of strategy and to the decisions of managers. Strategy Deployment is a Lean process for achieving this.

Managers deal pre-dominantly, however, with the currency of discontinuous improvement. Their world is more typically governed by their need to address large scale, radical, planned and unexpected change. For instance, introducing a new product, seeking to change the culture of the business or implementing new technology, all require high level thinking and action but also integration with the system of continuous improvement.

Successfully resolved discontinuous improvements are often transferred, for example, into the CI system as part of a ‘seamless integration’ into serial production. Problems that cannot be resolved at the level of CI – and may be said to fail to stabilise at that level – become part of the discontinuous problem solving process itself. In so doing, they are likely to receive significant resource to resolve them.

Whilst the processes of thinking are different – problem solving within CI starts with deep understanding of the current state and moves forward from there, where-as process design, for example, starts with hypothesis about the future state, tests to see if it works and then adds in the detail – they are both underpinned, and hence connected, by the PDCA improvement cycle.

Organisational Learning

Whilst the task of creating and managing systems of continuous and discontinuous improvement is predominantly (but not exclusively!) a managerial one, the task of creating the climate in which this can happen is a leadership one. Over and above all else, organisational learning is the leadership issue.

So what does the leader intend on creating the ‘learning organisation’ need to do? We offer some points around which current best thinking coheres:-

1. Understand the systemic nature of the enterprise, make sure that those around you understand this also and direct changes that bring about a tightly integrated operating model which has CI at its heart.

2. Create an environment in which it’s both safe to experiment and in which people get recognised for trying – asking ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ is a good starting point; being curious and open-minded builds on this; coaching others’ directly enables it whilst institutionalising problem solving, cements it.

3. Establish a clear management process into which learning from change activity and experimentation can be captured. Be very clear about the outcomes or results that the business needs and push relentlessly for these.

Without these emphases, the twists and turns involved in creating the environment of CI will not endure. Lean leaders must simultaneously understand the systems and processes that they and their people work in and have created; they need to be able to connect to and interpret strategy whilst using the capacity for problem solving which exists at all levels.

It’s a long term challenge for the mature leader.