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12 Pieces of Awful Continuous Improvement Management Advice

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There are lots of ideas floating around the internet about how to best spread a [culture of continuous improvement](#). I hate to tell you, but lots of them are bad ideas. From [making your suggestion boxes electronic](#) to behaving in ways that [discourage engagement](#), there's a lot of awful advice that should be ignored.

Here are 12 pieces of terrible advice – and corrections for each of them.

What would you add to our list of bad advice? Leave a comment [on our blog](#) and tell our readers!

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1. Spend most of your energy engaging underperformers

On the surface, it makes sense that people would tell you that you should devote the majority of your effort to engaging people in [continuous improvement](#) who are not contributing. I suppose the idea would be that high performers don't need your attention, while low performers do. I posit, though, that you instead spend the majority of your time engaging with people who ARE contributing to your improvement culture. [Respond quickly](#) to their ideas, remove barriers to implementation for them, [recognize them for their effort](#), and [broadcast their successes](#). Devoting the majority of your energy to the positive behavior of your employees will strengthen those behaviors in high performers, and encourage those who are not yet engaged to get on board. Of course you can't completely ignore the population that doesn't participate...but I would suggest drawing them into your culture with positive reinforcement, rather than attempting to force participation with a heavy hand.

2. It's only worth your time to implement the best ideas

I've lost track of how many suggestion systems I've heard of in which it's recommended to implement only the best ideas (typically rated so because of their high impacts). These people have it all wrong. A successful culture of continuous improvement implements at least 80% of the improvements its employees come up with - even if they're small, with a low impact, and seem insignificant to management. Why is that? By empowering people to improve all of the little things that bug them every day, you're increasing their job satisfaction, and likely the quality of your products, services, and customer satisfaction, too. Small, low cost, low risk ideas pave the way to widespread change.

3. Voting ideas up or down is a good way to engage your employees

This one really gets my goat. There's a lot of technology out there that combines an electronic suggestion box with social engagement in the form of voting, which is the completely wrong approach to spreading improvement. In this approach, people submit their ideas for improvement and then wait for their peers to vote the ideas up or down. The negative consequences of this are plentiful, including a decrease in engagement from the people whose ideas are voted down, and fewer improvements are implemented since only the best are accepted (see #2). It also decreases the overall number of ideas submitted, since people are less likely to submit ideas that are unlikely to "win." No matter how you look at it, this is terrible advice for a culture of continuous improvement.

4. You need to train everyone in process improvement tactics before getting started

This is perhaps one of the biggest delays to getting started with a culture of continuous improvement. Yes, it's true that there need to be some process improvement experts

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guiding the leadership and methodology behind the spread of improvement. But most people just need a basic understanding of what process improvement is, how it will help the company achieve its strategic goals, and what their role and responsibilities in the culture will be.

5. Save time by only reviewing employees' ideas in a monthly meeting

I hate folding laundry. My approach to solving this problem is to wait until someone is completely out of clean clothes, and then I do it all at once. This saves me time because I only have to put the clothes away once (and I only have to do something I hate once a week).

This is absolutely the wrong way to approach continuous improvement. The result of letting ideas pile up like dirty laundry is a decrease in engagement, as people lose enthusiasm for the ideas they submitted weeks ago. Leaders of continuous improvement need to respond immediately to employee input, even if it feels more efficient to do it sporadically.

6. Focus on ideas with a financial impact

Even the most well-meaning, well-informed leaders of continuous improvement make this mistake. After all - lots of organizations turn to improvement in order to improve their bottom line. The thing is, though, that by limiting your employees to ideas with a financial impact, you're eliminating a significant number of improvements. Employees typically participate in a culture of continuous improvement because they want to enjoy their jobs more, increase safety, produce better goods or services for your customers, and make your customers happier. They don't necessarily think of the bottom line on a daily basis, and that's ok! Financial impact follows on the heels of a well-balanced culture of continuous improvement in which safety, employee and customer satisfaction, and quality are valued.

7. Your managers will have the best improvement ideas

Your managers may have a deeper understanding of the organization's strategic objectives or financial goals, but it's the employees who best know how to improve their work. Makes sense, right? They're the ones doing it... Harnessing the collective brainpower of your staff rather than over-valuing the input of managers will increase the engagement and impact of your improvement culture. Ask your staff how they'd like to improve the organization, empower them to make those improvements, and reward them for their efforts.

8. Keep track of implemented improvements in a spreadsheet

This piece of advice comes from the right place, but the devil is in the details. It IS

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important to keep track of all of the improvements you've made so that knowledge isn't lost over time. However, [a spreadsheet is not the place to do it](#). Unlike a spreadsheet, [continuous improvement software](#) is easily searchable and employs notifications to remind people to follow up on and update old improvements. It is accessible to everyone, anytime. It provides impact and engagement metrics to keep track of where more coaching is needed, and doesn't get forgotten or out of date.

9. You need to provide employees with financial incentives to increase participation

Every time I write about recognizing and rewarding employees for participating in continuous improvement, the topic of financial incentives invariably comes up. This isn't always terrible advice - some forms of financial incentives can work out alright as long as you couple them with intrinsic motivation and other incentives too - but as a general rule, I suggest steering away from cash. The problem with cash incentives is that people focus too heavily on that, rather than on improvement for improvement's sake, and you lose opportunities for improvement that people know won't get a cash reward. It can also hamper collaboration. Instead, try social incentives like public recognition and broadcasting improvements and their impact. These will reward the engaged employees, with the added bonus of attracting people who have not yet participated.

10. Front line staff engagement is optional

Lots of companies claim to have a culture of continuous improvement because they do projects and/or events on a regular basis. Top-down improvement initiatives like [Rapid Improvement Events](#), Kaizen Blitzes, and [Value Stream Mapping](#) events are awesome, don't get me wrong, but a culture of continuous improvement depends heavily on bottom-up improvements, too. Only by engaging front line employees in the improvement process can you truly spread a culture of improvement.

11. There needs to be lots of planning and evaluation before implementing ideas

This is terrible advice, unless you're considering a time intensive, expensive, or risky improvement. If that's what you're working on, plan away. Most of the time, though, your improvements will be small, low-cost, and low-risk. When that's the case, don't bog down the improvement process by making employees jump through hoops. If there's minimal downside to giving the improvement a shot, let them get started right away.

12. All ideas are either implemented or rejected

The last piece of awful advice I have to share with you is that you either have to implement or reject every idea your employees have. Lots of organizations make this mistake, which means they have a pretty low implementation rate (which is bad for all of the reasons discussed above). The solution here is to look deeper at the opportunities for improvement people bring forward. Chances are, they've identified a real opportunity,

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even if their proposed solution is less than ideal. The correct way to deal with this is to help them find a better solution by providing additional coaching or connecting them with others who can help. You don't have to implement every solution that comes across your desk... but you do have to address every opportunity for improvement.

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