

A Lot of Improvement and a Bit of Sense

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It seems that every business owner I've met lately is at least willing to acknowledge that, to remain competitive in today's marketplace, they must look for ways to continuously improve their programs, processes, products and/or services. As we begin to establish a dialogue on this subject however, the discussion rapidly turns to sales, profit margins and market share; little more is said on how such improvements would occur, or in the longer term, on how such a system of on-going improvements would be sustainable.

Saying that, *"we'll do better"*, *"we'll pay more attention"*, or *"we won't do that again"* are all noble intentions. If repeated enough times from the "C-Level" (executive management), we can create a level of awareness in our organization that hadn't existed previously. We can continue promoting this cause further using banners, plaques, newsletters and other fan-fare (free food always draws a crowd), and watch as the awareness of this issue within our organization skyrockets, at least momentarily. We'll make it a bullet-point for discussion as part of every meeting we have. If we print our intent on the back of enough business cards, we might even get our customers to believe it.

When we use such terms as "better", "less", and "more" however, it only serves to illustrate the fact that we really don't have a measurement or indicator of how we're actually performing in this area. Our initiatives subsequently fail, not because of our level of commitment or our promotion, but because do not know where we're going; worse yet, we don't even know where we're starting from. At this point, it's not about our sincerity or resolve, but rather the ability to define an ideal future state, and then figuring out how to get there.

Organizations don't budget based around simply wanting to make "lots" of money or incurring a "small" expense or perform strategic planning around gaining a "bit" of market share. These activities focus on objectives, goals and targets that are important to the shareholders of the company. At our finger-tips, we are then able to pull up information that shows us our progress towards meeting these desired outcomes. We can see if our business is operating at a profit or loss and what our margins are. On an on-going basis, we monitor and report our sales performance in terms of sales volume, our ability to reach quotas, our customer relations, expense account usage, time management and other measures.

Successful organizations thrive financially not solely because of commitment and promotion, but because they plan, they budget, they develop infrastructure, they assign responsibilities, they monitor and they adjust and/or correct on a continuous basis. Relatively few organizations however, can make a similar claim, as it relates to the management of their improvement initiatives.

Commitment and promotion are all fine in their own right, and are essential pieces to completing the improvement puzzle; however, none of these gestures do anything however to actually address the organization's present condition. While awareness can be an important catalyst for change, it's not enough for an organization to simply want to improve.

Why again then, are we managing our improvement efforts differently than the other areas of our business...?



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