

Chapter 7.1

The importance of continuous improvement

Benefits of this chapter

Developing your National aquatics Federation takes time, especially for smaller federations just starting to establish aquatics sports in their country. Setting up effective management systems, promoting your brand and growing your membership can be challenging and chances are, you may have to try multiple strategies before determining what methods work best.

Refining processes at all levels of your federation is part of continuous improvement. The most successful organisations in the world – business, non-profit, political, etc. – have developed formal continuous improvement programmes that aim to make all organisational functions and resources work better and more efficiently over time. Your federations can do the same thing, and in this chapter, you will learn the basics of continuous improvement and how to integrate the concept into your National aquatics Federation.

Introduction

Every competitive swimmer, diver and water polo athlete has gotten to the elite level through years of practice and dedication. But these athletes have not simply repeated the same training exercises day after day. Instead, these athletes and their coaches have regularly evaluated and refined their training methods to ensure that the athlete's using the best techniques to stay as competitive as possible in the water.

As the leading organisation supporting aquatics athletes in your country, your federation should reflect the same principles athletes use to stay competitive and perform at their full potential. By committing to the idea of continuously improving your approach to managing and developing aquatics sports, you can instil performance-driven values into your federation at every level. This can have a significant impact on how your federation develops and how supportive and inspiring you can be for the athletes you champion.

In this chapter, you can begin to understand the basic elements of continuous improvement and strategies to implement the concept in your federation. Topics covered include:

- What is continuous improvement?
- What are the advantages of continuous improvement?
- How and when should continuous improvement strategies be used?
- What are the obstacles to continuous improvement and how can we overcome them?

While many companies and organisations implement highly sophisticated and complex continuous improvement strategies, your federation should not feel overwhelmed by the concept. Instead, by focusing on the basics of continuous improvement and the simple notion of always striving to do better – just like your athletes do – you can help your federation grow in significant ways.

What is continuous improvement?

Company executives and human resources professionals have various definitions of continuous improvement. But despite all the theoretical and academic study of continuous improvement, the concept is quite simple.

A solid definition of continuous improvement is:

The belief that an organisation must constantly measure the effectiveness of its processes and strive to meet more difficult objectives to satisfy customers.

In other words, continuous improvement is about setting clear goals, having ways to measure progress toward those goals, refining goals and strategies based on those measurements and setting new goals over time to satisfy your customers.

So what are the basics of continuous improvement? It is more than just being committed to doing a better job over time – it is about involving employees at all levels to make doing a better job an inherent aspect of the way your federation functions. For example, consider your athletes. When they dive in the pool

each morning to practice, they probably are not thinking about the long-term benefits of that morning's practice. Rather, diving in the pool each morning is an inherent part of their lifestyle (the way they function). They do it because getting better at their "job" is simply part of who they are. The same can be true of your federation with basic continuous improvement strategies.

The following list includes some of the most important elements of continuous improvement:

1/ Everyone is involved

Continuous improvement involves more than federation executives and managers. All employees at all levels must be part of continuous improvement, including its development, implementation and evaluation.

2/ It is incremental

Continuous improvement is a step-by-step approach. It is not something your federation can do over the course of a week, month or year and then stop doing because a goal has been achieved. Rather, by incrementally improving the way your federation works, you can integrate the concept into everything your federation does.

3/ It is cyclical

In addition to being incremental, continuous improvement is a cycle instead of a single goal – the process never ends. Goals are set, steps are taken to achieve them, the effectiveness of those steps are evaluated and refined, goals are accomplished and new, more challenging goals are set and the process starts again.

4/ It is measurable

Swimmers would not be able to improve if they did not know their times in each event. Similarly, your federation cannot improve the way it functions if the strategies and processes being used at all levels – executive, management and staff – are not measurable. With strategies for measurement and review, your federation can more accurately determine how each process can be improved.

What are the advantages of continuous improvement?

It is easy to say that doing a better job over time is good for an organisation. But continuous improvement has specific advantages that can help your federation improve its processes and become more influential over time.

The following list highlights some of the most important advantages:

1/ Generates "buy-in" and support from all employees

By involving every employee – from the CEO to the maintenance staff of your federation – all employees can have a sense of ownership and contribution to the federation's larger mission. This is particularly true for larger federations where the size of the organisation can begin to make individual employees feel less significant or more detached from the central mission.

2/ Creates synergy between management and staff

Synchronised swimmers rely on synergy, communication and mutual trust and understanding to deliver their most precise and impressive performances. Your federation also needs synergy between your executive management, department managers and general staff to be efficient and portray a positive image to your customers. By bringing all levels of the organisation together to develop continuous improvement strategies, each employee can have a better understanding of why certain changes are being made and how those changes are good for aquatics sports and internal federation operations.

3/ Provides factual, objective basis for decision making

In many organisations, well-intentioned changes to internal operations can be perceived as arbitrary decisions made by executives who do not really understand what it takes for general staff to do their jobs. By creating measurable, quantifiable strategies, your federation can explain how and why you are doing certain things based on objective criteria. This increases transparency and makes staff and customers feel more understanding and trusting of the decisions your federation makes.

4/ Reinforces your image as an organisation driven by performance

In the sports community, many organisations and federations operate in a way that is at odds with the basic concept and ideals of athleticism which are striving to improve, dedication to achieving goals and motivated by a desire to be the best. By creating continuous improvement strategies, you demonstrate to your staff, your customers and your competitors that your federation is driven by the same thing that your athletes are – performance. This image is a key element to being perceived by the sports community as a serious, credible national aquatics federation. With credibility, you can become more influential in sport at home and internationally.

How and when should continuous improvement strategies be used?

Many executives and managers think that the only time to develop improvement strategies is when something is going wrong in an organisation. However, improvement strategies should take place all the time, even when operations are running smoothly. In other words, there is always a better way to do something – and never a best way. Instilling this concept across your organisation can help make your organisation less process-driven and more project and performance-driven.

The following list includes some helpful tips for creating an effective continuous improvement programme within your federation:

1/ Start now

There is no reason to delay creating and implementing continuous improvement strategies. The sooner you do, the sooner you can see the benefits.

2/ Communicate before you create strategies

If continuous improvement is a new concept for your federation, you will want to share with all employees why you are making this change. The best way to communicate is having the leader of the organisation – perhaps the CEO or Executive Director – share why the federation is instilling continuous improvement strategies and what the benefits are for each employee. It is crucial to share with employees how they will be affected and how federation leadership needs their help to drive the federation, and aquatics sports in general, forward. Also, be sure to communicate in a personal manner. Most national aquatics federations should be small enough that all employees can be brought together and communicated in a face-to-face, personal manner. This will go a long way to creating buy-in and support at all levels.

3/ Think big picture, then little picture

Once federation executives have communicated the importance of continuous improvement, individual department managers should be responsible for communicating more specifics to general employees. Employees will likely have questions about what continuous improvement is, why it is necessary and how it will affect the way work is done at the federation. Department managers are best equipped to handle these specific questions, and it will create stronger bonds in the process.

4/ Create goals and strategies

Each department (managers and staff) should sit down as a group and determine what goals they want to achieve and develop strategies for accomplishing them. The goals and strategies must be measurable to determine how effective they are, and dates for review must be set up in advance so everyone knows when progress will be reviewed.

For example, if the federation wants to get more exposure in sports media, then the marketing department should sit together as a group and develop the goals and the strategies. A measurable goal could be increasing the number of magazine articles written about the federation by 25% over the next year. Measurable strategies could include increasing the number of media contacts in your contact database, increasing the amount of contact the department makes with media in the database and increase the volume of information supplied to the media. And the interval for review could be every three months.

5/ Assign roles clearly

Each member of the department should clearly understand what his or her role is in executing strategies to achieve the stated goal. In the example of increasing media exposure, the Marketing Manager may be responsible for oversight, while the Marketing Coordinator is responsible for making more contact with the media and increasing the volume of information supplied to them. The Marketing Assistant would be responsible for increasing the number of contacts in the contact database.

6/ Evaluate progress and refine strategies

As agreed to by the entire department, there should be a review of progress every three months. First, the goal should be reviewed – have you achieved or made progress toward your goal? Assume that 100 magazine articles were written last year, so this year, your federation wants to increase that to 125. Over the first three months since setting your goal, there have been 30 articles written, which is an improvement over the 25 written during the same time period last year. So progress has been made, but more may need to be done to achieve your goal of 125 by the end of the year.

So, the next step is evaluating your strategies and making adjustments to drive the overall goal forward. The Marketing Manager determines that her oversight of the goal should improve, so instead of checking in on progress once every two weeks, she will check progress once every week. The Marketing Coordinator has made more contact with the media by emailing more contacts and providing more information about an aquatics sport not typically covered – in this case, Open Water Swimming. Over the next three months, he will provide more information about open water swimming and synchronised swimming. And the Marketing Assistant has entered 20 new contacts into the contact database. Over the next three months, she will try to add 30 more.

Once the next three months are over, the same process of evaluation and refinement should take place to track progress and improve the approach for achieving the goal.

Elevate your goals

Once you have achieved your goal, it is crucial to elevate your goals to a higher level using the same process for setting and pursuing your goals. In the media exposure example, assume that the Marketing Department achieved its goal of increasing magazine coverage by 25%. The next step would be to broaden the scope of the department's goals. In this case, that could mean increasing magazine coverage by an additional 30% over the coming year, or perhaps increasing exposure in other media – television, online, etc.

Remember to celebrate

The emphasis on constantly doing better can potentially lead some employees to feel like his or her work is never good enough. That is why it is crucial to celebrate wins when they occur. Accomplishing goals should not be taken for granted or gone unnoticed. Rather, those moments should be celebrated and communicated at all levels of the federation. Doing so can inspire other departments and motivate everyone to continue the cycle of continuous improvement.

What are the obstacles to continuous improvement and how can we overcome them?

There will always be obstacles to implementing new philosophies or organisational strategies within your federation. Change can make some people feel uncomfortable or resistant, which is quite natural. Understanding that can help

you address those challenges and get everyone in your federation on-board with the concept of continuous improvement.

The following list highlights some of the most common challenges, including tips for overcoming them.

1/ Challenge: The emphasis on continuous improvement makes managers and staff think that executives are not satisfied with their work.

Tip: From the very beginning of any new continuous improvement programme, make sure that the purpose of the programme is clearly communicated to all employees from your federation's leadership. It is typically best to communicate what continuous improvement is, why it is important and how it will affect and enhance work within the federation. Be as transparent as possible and allow employees to ask questions and share their thoughts

2/ Challenge: Employees seem confused or concerned about changes related to continuous improvement.

Tip: Before employees can make contributions to the federation in general, they need to know how continuous improvement will affect them and how they do their job. Make sure department managers are fully informed and equipped to answer employee questions and explain why continuous improvement is a good thing for all employees on a personal level (e.g. they will develop new skills, have greater ownership of their role and have direct impact on the work being done and decisions being made). Once employees are comfortable with how change will affect them personally, they can begin to look beyond their own work and contribute to the larger mission of your federation.

3/ Challenge: Employees understand the importance of continuous improvement and want to improve, but they express that they do not have the resources or know-how to improve certain operations within the federation.

Tip: Human and financial resources will vary between National Federations, so federation leaders must be realistic about what can be improved and how quickly. When availability of resources exists, provide your staff with useful training in areas that could improve productivity and efficiency – for example, computer training, presentation skills or negotiating skills training. Consult with employees to understand what skills they need and allow them to be a part of the process when selecting training courses. Also, consider developing opportunities for departments within the federation to share best practices with each other. This builds a sense of teamwork, and also reduces the cost of finding external training providers.

4/ Challenge: Employees have helped you develop new strategies and they are using those strategies in the way they work, but federation executives really do not know how well they are working.

Tip: Employee input should not end in the development phase of continuous improvement strategies. Rather, employee input should be a part of every step in the continuous improvement cycle. So, once strategies have been implemented, make sure that a feedback mechanism is in place to understand what employees think about the strategies. Potential feedback mechanisms could be monthly meetings, a suggestion box or sending out an email asking for regular feedback. In addition to receiving feedback, you will strengthen employee engagement and you may discover new ideas and suggestions that drive the continuous improvement cycle forward.

Continuous improvement is more than just a generic term that expresses the ideals of always striving to do better. Instead, continuous improvement is an actual strategy that high-performing organisations use to make “doing better” a real, tangible part of the way the organisation operates.

For national aquatics federation – many of which may be small and in the early stages of development – continuous improvement strategies may be quite simple. And that’s OK. The most important part is that the concept of continuous improvement be fully integrated into the way you work. Instead of simply checking projects off a list of things to do, there should be opportunities before, during and after projects are completed to engage employees in learning from each project and developing better, more impactful ways of completing them in the future.

Useful tips

- Communicate, communicate, communicate. With regard to continuous improvement, you cannot really over-communicate. By explaining the importance of continuous improvement and any changes associated with it, you can help employees overcome any initial hesitations so they can focus on improving the federation and driving the mission forward.
- Involve employees as much as possible. No employee ever wants to feel like they are simply reacting to what their bosses tell them to do. Instead, they want to feel like they have a voice, especially regarding matter that affects their jobs directly. So, allow employees to be part of developing, implementing and evaluating any continuous improvement strategy.
- Highlight improvements whenever possible. When new strategies prove to be useful within your organisation, make a dedicated effort to showcase that across the federation. Employees need to see the product of their work and know that it is appreciated – just like a swimmer needs to see his/her times get faster after making changes to his/her training routine.