

Overview of ASI

The ASI Process was developed for business owners, managers, and working professionals as a simple and effective methodology that can be learned quickly to bring about immediate change and improvement in their activities and operations. Very few organizations have the ability (nor do most owners or managers have the budget) to stop working and spend hours, days, or weeks figuring out the best way to do something. Business and work cannot stop! The ASI Process allows organizations to continue to function while introducing process improvements and changes.

When people think of change, they imagine pain – more work, having to sit and learn new ‘stuff’ while still trying to get work done. It’s much easier to generate buy-in when we’re not pushing change, but bringing improvements, empowering our staff, and making their lives easier. Change is going to happen whether we want it or not. Instead of fighting it and everyone feeling frustrated, by using the ASI Process you and your staff can embrace and lead the change. Bringing your staff on as active participants will help lower resistance and increase job satisfaction.

The ASI Process consists of six steps with each letter in ‘ASI’ representing two steps:

A – Agree

Assess

S – Simplify

Standardize

I – Improve

Implement

Agree – You and your staff must accept that change is necessary and, in many cases, inevitable. You must commit yourselves to managing change as a team and being committed to the process. It must be said, in this book, and with your team that process improvement does not mean cost cutting, re-structuring, or laying people off. The goal is to do better with what we have and make jobs and tasks more streamlined and efficient.

The necessity of buy-in cannot be overstated. All it takes is one person to be negative or obstructive and things will quickly grind to a halt. This book is not about conflict resolution or general management, but you want to surround yourself with like-minded, positive, and committed people. There is no room for negativity – as a leader, take the necessary steps to identify any obstructionists early on and take action – be it re-assigning or separating them from the organization. This may not always be an option, so it is up to the leader to come up with a solution and get this person out of the way – for the sake of the group and for the sake of the organization. We will have a written agreement to improve, called a Charter, so even if

someone has reservations (which is normal), everyone must agree to give their best efforts in supporting process improvement and helping the organization do better.

The Charter will outline the process improvement objectives, who will play what role on the team or teams, and the rules for behavior, e.g., allowing contributions and input from all, every team member having an equal voice, etc.

In this stage we will pick a Project Manager for the process improvement cycles and to take responsibility for compiling our process improvement guide. This can be the owner or manager but, if possible, it would be good to empower a staff member to do this while the owner or manager acts as the executive sponsor. Depending on the size of your organization, the PM can oversee each individual process improvement cycle or the process improvement effort as a whole and assign staff members to process teams.

Assess – What needs improving exactly? Can we identify our processes? What activities do we do? Are there actions or evolutions that occur that do not have formal processes? We will list these out and prioritize the order in which we will address them. Prioritizing can be done by mutual agreement, ranked voting, or other methods, but generally we want to start with simple and/or common processes. This allows more involvement of the group, and these simple processes give us practice in working as a team, mapping processes, finding improvements, testing our changes, and implementing the new and improved processes. Each process being analyzed or improved will have an assigned process owner to manage and lead efforts in each process improvement cycle such as mapping, analyzing the process, and documenting the outcomes for the Process Improvement Guide.

Simplify – At this step we begin mapping out our processes. These are very basic and at a high-level. The idea here is to get a nice overview of what occurs, what people or resources are used (inputs), how and in what order they are used (our process), and what the expected outcome is (outputs). This will not require complicated graphics or sophisticated lingo – just a sequence of boxes representing the steps in as best of an order as we can provide for now. If there is no formal process, we use our best judgment to determine what actions ought to occur and in what order. This is where we lean on our staff that actually perform the work or tasks – these are our Subject Matter Experts. We are not seeking perfection – just a basic process flow that we can map that makes sense. We want to have input from as many staff or departments as possible. The processes may be different between individuals or departments. These are mapped separately to get a better grasp on what is being done throughout the organization.

Standardize – This is where change starts. A common occurrence in organizations is to have multiple methods (or processes) used to achieve the same ‘result’ or output. We now want to merge these separate process maps into one uniform process for the entire organization. There may be steps missing between the staff members or departments or the sequence of steps could be in different orders. This is where the rules of our Charter must be respected and adhered to. Give everyone an opportunity to provide suggestions either verbally or via written

feedback or critiques. Again, we are not looking for a perfect process or the most efficient. Right now, we want a stable and repeatable process that gets us the desired outcome, so we do not interrupt the flow of work currently being done.

Improve – How can we make the process faster or simpler? Where are the delays or choke points? Being mindful of legal or safety requirements, are all the steps truly necessary? What value is added at each step? It can be a physical action or something as simple as an acknowledgement or approval of a document. We can start timing the process at each step and overall and make changes to our inputs to try for improved or more consistent outcomes. Again, we're not looking for perfection. Keep it simple and avoid getting stuck in analyzing. A vast majority of organizations do not need statistical analyses to tell them what is better or even the best way to do something. One process could take slightly longer but provide an improved output. We could spend countless hours figuring out how to measure the improvement, more hours doing the measurements, and then even more hours doing an analysis. In traditional methodologies this would be the correct way to do it, but do you really have the time, staff, or money to spare? Probably not. You need results and you and your staff know what you are doing. With all that in mind, do take the time to test your outputs or products with the end-user or customer. Does it meet their expectations or needs? Are they happy with it? Get their unfiltered feedback and take it back to the team. Our goal is to improve processes, but it could be argued that customer satisfaction is the ultimate and final goal. If the customer is not happy or satisfied, then our process is irrelevant no matter how good we think it is. Feedback and any results from testing of the improved process need to be documented by the Process Owner for inclusion in the Process Guide. This is especially the case when changes or modifications to the process are made based on feedback so that in future process improvement review cycles project teams can understand the rationale of why a process was established in a certain manner.

Implement – Once we are happy with the improved process, and we have tested it internally and externally with customers, we can now roll it out to the entire organization. Bear in mind that we never stop improving. Someone that was not on the testing team may have an idea or suggestion that was missed by everyone else. Welcome and encourage this type of feedback. Just like during the Improve Step, the Process Owner needs to document the feedback in the Process Guide.

The improved process is now in place and working, we do not fix and forget. Before we start working on the next process on our Process Improvement Log the Process Owner, the Project Manager, and possibly the Executive Sponsor, need to meet and determine a timetable to revisit and verify that we're happy with the process, the outcomes are still in line with our expectations, and the outputs are appropriate and at the quality we want or expect. Have there been any changes to regulations, suppliers, customers, or market demands?

We have established a culture of improvement and mechanisms need to be put in place for continuous feedback, but we also need to have a scheduled review. This can be once a year,

every six months, or once a quarter although some processes may require once a month. Use your best judgment and that of your staff to make that determination. Each process is unique as are the influencing factors – trust yourself and your team in determining the correct frequency of reviews.

Continuous feedback can be encouraged through suggestion boxes, a dedicated email address for submissions, or dedicated times on the agenda of routine meetings.

The scheduled process reviews need to include the process owner, relevant staff, and management/leadership. A best practice is for the Process Improvement Manager to check in with the Process Owner a month before the scheduled review to provide a friendly reminder and offer assistance with meeting preparation.

One final note: in the following chapters we will use various examples from case studies, and you will have the opportunity to do some practice exercises. Invest the time in reading these examples and doing the exercises. We will also use a running example of making a cup of tea to illustrate the ASI Process. This is a simple example, but it illustrates the ASI Process in very basic terms in a fairly universal or familiar process which most readers can relate to. Once you understand the methodology in these simple terms, introducing it into your organization will be much easier and less intimidating.

The beauty of the ASI Process is that it is easy to learn, easy to do, and easy to teach. Trust the process!