

2 - Agree

Many leaders find themselves too busy to manage current activities or are hyper-focused on either larger goals or mission or revenue generating activities or the next sale. This is especially true in small businesses and in organizations where there is a change in staff, routine or significant, or leadership.

Regardless, change is going to occur whether we want it or not. New technologies will come out, a new competitor will appear, customers will demand a change (quality, pricing, etc.), or your staff will demand a change (better pay, working conditions, resources). To put it simply, people's expectations will change and you have to be ready for it. You can fight it all you want (and you will lose), or you can embrace it and lead your organization to its next iteration.

First, give yourself some credit. Do not be overwhelmed or discouraged. You have the skills and abilities to lead change and drive improvement in your organization. This process can be fun and interesting and will not only increase your bottom-line, but encourage a positive and thriving culture within your organization. We are going to increase your profitability and productivity, and decrease your stress.

Process improvement is an intrinsic phenomenon. We are naturally inclined to want to do things in an easier or more efficient manner be it planning a route for a road trip, making a list of errands and deciding in which order you will complete them, or getting ready in the morning... coffee, breakfast, shower, brush teeth, dress, or breakfast + coffee at the same time, brush teeth, shower, dress. In other words, there is no deep dark secret to process improvement and you already have the skills to do it. What ASI offers is a framework to manage it better for your organization.

Humility is a common word used in the world of business and understand that while you may have many of the answers you do not have them all. Further, there is no shame in asking for help from your staff in making the organization better. Moving forward you have to be open to criticism and suggestions, and accept that some will be good, some will be bad, and some may even painful. This does not mean you will have to agree with them. Your job is to hear it, to listen, and understand why. Why is this being said? What is the cause? Your humility and openness as a leader will pay dividends with your staff in terms of loyalty and commitment, so swallow your pride just a little and make the investment.

Starting off you need to establish your process improvement team. For a new business this can be you and a handful of employees or partners, but for a small business or department you want to involve your staff in the experience to make it more representative to increase buy-in. Select people with different roles, backgrounds, and experience levels to provide a comprehensive view or perspective. New employees have just as much to offer as someone who has been in a role for more than 20 years.

Establish the Ground Rules

1. Open Sessions and Speaking Freely

We have talked about humility but make this explicitly clear with your staff that this is an expectation you have not only for yourself, but also for them. At the same time, this doesn't mean anyone can unleash anything they want to the group. Criticisms must be presented in a respectful manner and cannot become personal attacks on others. As leader, you are responsible for making this absolutely clear and ensuring adherence. If someone has a suggestion that they feel may cause distress or anger, let the team know that you can be approached separately away from the group.

2. Commitment to Improvement

This is going to be a team effort and everyone has to be on board. You want to encourage participation and make it clear that everyone has something to add. This in turn will increase commitment from your staff. There are going to be instances where you won't find consensus – there may be some disagreement on which process needs to be addressed first or the order of the steps in a process. It's okay to agree to disagree and let the owner or leader make the final decision. Everyone must agree to this principle with the only exception being issues of safety or relevant laws or regulations.

For more established organizations, there may be some staff members that make it clear they will have no part in process improvement teams, or even worse, are so committed to 'the old ways' that they will not accept new processes or methods of doing things and actively try to disrupt improvements. This is not an uncommon occurrence and you must be ready to address it immediately as their negativity can spread and be fatal to your efforts. An open and honest discussion with these individuals needs to occur but if they are not committed to your efforts then you must consider the options – continue to be a clunky and stagnant organization with these same people and same problems or it's time to evolve, change, and grow. It can be very painful to part ways, but you must do what is not only best for the organization now, but for the organization in the future.

3. Roles

Executive Sponsor

There has to be someone guiding the effort or project. The top-level leader of the organization, such as the owner, a director, or manager, will typically fill the role of Executive Sponsor. The Executive Sponsor has ultimate understanding and authority in essentially all aspects of the business and will have final say on any matters impacting the business. The Executive Sponsor will not be involved with day to day operations and will not be in the process improvement meetings, but is invested in the outcomes. If significant hurdles or barriers are encountered, the Executive Sponsor would be the one to intervene.

Project Manager

At the more direct level of involvement in the process improvement efforts, a Project Manager will need to be designated. In a small business or organization this can be the owner or manager, therefore fulfilling both roles of Executive Sponsor and Project manager, but in larger organizations a dedicated project manager, other than the Executive Sponsor, will need to be designated.

The Project Manager will be responsible for managing timelines and running the process improvement meetings. Trust this person to make the right decisions and empower them to do so, yet make sure they fully understand the overall objective, the ASI Process, and when to come to you for guidance or decisions. The Project Manager must be as objective as possible, have superb communication skills, and have excellent organizational skills. They are going to help maintain momentum and keep track of efforts which includes developing a Process Improvement Guide.

The Process Improvement Guide is a repository, either electronic or paper-based, that will hold the process maps and notes as well as developed process guides or instructions that are created during the ASI Process. With the assistance of other staff members, the Process Improvement Guide serves as a repository so that if any staff members leave the organization, their knowledge doesn't go with them.

This is sometimes referred to as Knowledge Management. The Process Improvement Guide does not have to be overly complicated. Process Maps and Reference Guides are best to include, but references or notes that were compiled during the ASI process may be useful for when future process improvement teams are assessing processes and need to understand why certain decisions were made.

Make it clear that for larger or longer efforts, there may be a need to rotate the role of Project Manager. The need may also arise when working on a specific process or within a certain area of the business or organization. The role of the project manager is not a position of power; it is a position of facilitating so egos do not need to be hurt if it becomes necessary to rotate or switch project managers. You could rotate project managers regardless to encourage participation or spread out the experience to others.

Process Owners and Subject Matter Experts

The Process Owners and Subject Matter Experts are going to be your staff that have the in-depth expertise and knowledge on the various processes that we're going to document and improve. Process Owners will be responsible, with the support of the Project Manager, to document and map the process we're looking to improve. The Process Owner will also lead the meetings with the Subject Matter Experts to detail the processes and the steps involved.

The Subject Matters Experts are the staff members have the process and institutional knowledge that make the organization work. Not only is their knowledge invaluable, but so is their time. It is important for the Project Manager and Process Owner to make sure that the time of the Subject Matter Experts is used appropriately. The organization runs on their efforts, so we do not want them sitting in meeting after meeting, after meeting to go over a process repeatedly. Use their knowledge to document and map the processes and get their feedback on improvements, but don't burden them.

4. Establish Objectives and Parameters

What is the overall goal of the effort? Establish processes for a certain activity within the organization? Improve certain processes? A smaller or newer organization may want to 'do everything', but you still want to define a high-level objective or theme. In project management we call this the Project Scope.

Do not be too restrictive in your parameters or scope unless the effort is for a very specific area of your organization or business. Part of what you are striving for is a culture of openness, communication, and continuous process improvement. Many organizations when doing these types of efforts will say, 'Nothing is sacred', but this is rarely true. Be honest with yourself and your staff. Decide on a goal, scope, or objective, make sure it's understood across the team, and write it down. If you do want every aspect of your organization to be looked at this is fine, but set priorities from a high level to give some direction.

During the project, or projects, other areas of improvement will be discovered, so it is good practice to establish a running log or list of topics or opportunities for improvement than can be addressed later. We will call this your Process Improvement Log. As you will learn, process improvement never ends and once the mindset is fully a part of your organizations culture, the list of opportunities will never end (which is a good thing!).

If there are multiple high-level opportunities or themes identified, you may decide to have a project manager for each one. Use your best judgement. Do not spend days or weeks figuring this out;

ultimately you need to get started. Too many organizations and consultants waste hours (that you are paying for) trying to write the perfect objective statement, let alone identifying objectives. What do you want to do? As this Process Improvement Effort grows and matures, new information and perspectives will come to light and priorities will likely change and evolve, so even the 'perfect' objective or plan will change. Our goal is immediate impact so get feedback, make a decision, write it down in the Project Charter, and let's keep moving.

5. Agree to a Schedule

The process improvement team will need to meet on a consistent and routine basis to ensure progress is being made, and that we're staying within scope or the agreed to parameters. Use your best judgement, or let the Project Manager use theirs, in deciding how often the team needs to meet – weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Having gaps of a month or more between meetings is generally too long and will dilute urgency or commitment. Having multiple meetings every week for the entire team will likely make it a routine annoyance. Again, use your best judgement, but also ask the team for their thoughts. You all know yourselves and your organization the best.

6. Write it Down and Sign it!

The ground rules have been established, the project manager identified, the objective articulated, and the meeting schedules have been agreed upon. Now you want to write it all down in one place as a formal agreement with the team and have them sign it. This is generally called a Project Charter, so we will use this term as well. This simple gesture, having the team sign the charter, creates a psychological and social commitment to the team and the effort, and demonstrates an understanding of our purpose.

SAMPLE CHARTER

Our Purpose: Establish processes for making our products and open and closing procedures.

Project Manager: Joe

Meeting Frequency: Once a week – Fridays at 9 AM

Meetings Rules:

- 1) No judgement
- 2) No talking over each
- 3) Open to ideas and critiques
- 4) Perfect is not the goal – consistency is
- 5) Have fun!

Signatures: