

Managing your stakeholders in improvement projects

Traditionally, Continuous Improvement projects are about applying a robust and proven problem-solving methodology and a suite of data analysis tools to identify, understand and improve processes.

These approaches range from the straightforward Plan Do Check Act to the more sophisticated DMAICT, and there is no doubt that structure and discipline lends objectivity and credibility to improvement effort.

However, every seasoned Continuous Improvement Practitioner will tell you that it all works perfectly until people get involved. "The soft issues are the hard issues" they say. How do we work with the apparent unpredictability of people, accommodating their widely varying needs, opinions and beliefs and satisfying everyone? Why do our efforts to communicate continually fail? What skills and tools do we need to leverage our Continuous Improvement expertise and make improvements truly sustainable?

Managing stakeholders begins with understanding them. Identifying who your stakeholders are and engaging them as early as possible in the project both eliminates misunderstandings further down the line and increases opportunities for them to get involved and contribute to the changes you are trying to introduce. An early analysis of the extent to which people will be affected by your plans and their potential influence on them (whether negative or positive) can help you prepare for your first meetings. Different tactics are required when selling your ideas to a senior person who could be a major obstacle to those who are on the margins but are broadly supportive.

"I've never before been asked what I want, let alone how I feel about it".

"For once I feel valued and don't think that changes will be forced upon me".

"I have the chance to contribute from the start so the solution is more likely to work for me".

With key stakeholders you want to help them understand the potential opportunities that your plans present to them and also highlight the risks of maintaining the status quo. It also helps if you can understand their personal stake in the project; what they stand to gain and lose, and what is important to them. Addressing these issues up front ensures there are shared expectations and ultimately solutions that are more closely tailored to meet their needs. Often, merely engaging in conversation wins you support.

Once we have established where our stakeholders are coming from, we can start to think about how to communicate with them. Good communication is dependent upon three things: the credibility of the communicator, the validity of the message, and the impact it has on the receiver. Having a logical and robust case that is expressed in terms that people can relate to, and conveying it in a way that evokes an appropriate emotional reaction, are the keys to success.

"I know what I need to do rather than just what others have done".

"People are talking to me as a person, not confusing me with a load of jargon".

"I have confidence in this project because I see people doing what they say they are doing".

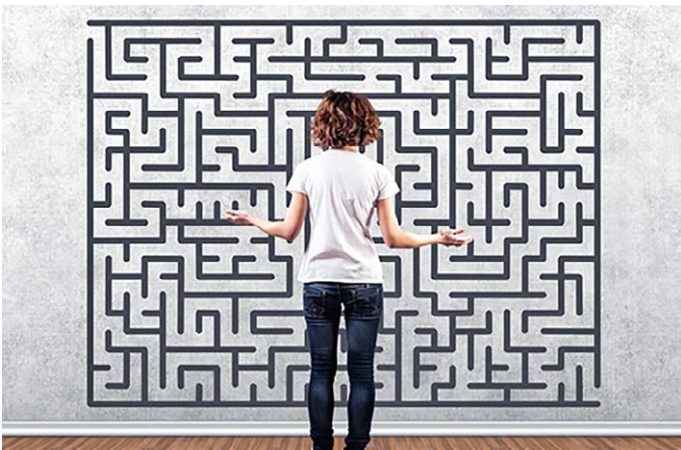
"The data convinces me we need to change"

Having an understanding of peoples' current perceptions will also help you plan and prepare for difficult encounters. Similarly, knowing what you want people to do as a result of the communication will give focus to your message and make it easy for people to engage with. Remember that most people forget 95% of what they have been told within 10 hours, but an impression formed by your body language and tone of voice could endure for years! Don't underestimate the value of feedback either.

You need to know how people are reacting so you can take appropriate action in good time and, again, people respond well to being consulted. Focus groups, questionnaires, one to one meetings and corridor chats are all valuable sources.

As your project or programme progresses, the stakeholders, their needs and their levels of understanding will change too. Revisit your communication plan as frequently as your project plan and ensure that the two are co-ordinated. In this way your stakeholders will develop an accurate and current awareness of your progress and how they can support you.

Finally, developing your own range of interpersonal skills to complement your problem-solving skills can help you to sell ideas, negotiate resources and build relationships. Being able to establish rapport, probe perceptions and help people to reach conclusions - through the deft use of questioning, demonstrating active listening and observation, and being able to give and receive feedback constructively - all enhance your ability to navigate the difficult waters that are the people aspects of Continuous Improvement.



How prepared are you to manage the 'great expectations' of tomorrow?

Think about a possible change programme in your organisation. Who would the principle stakeholders be? When would you start to engage with them?

To what degree would the key players in your organisation be impacted by change and what opportunity would they have to influence it for good or bad? How could you develop and maintain a closer relationship with them through the transition? What would you need to do to convert resistance into demand for change?

If you need help with any of these questions - we'd like to hear from you.



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Mike is a highly experienced Change and Organisational Development specialist and has delivered significant change programmes in a wide range of larger private companies and public bodies since moving into consultancy in 1991. Having established a commercial consultancy for Leeds Metropolitan University in 1993 he went on to establish and lead two national consulting practices on behalf of major accounting firms. During the last 25 years Mike has focused on developing organisational structures, leaders, senior teams and corporate cultures to improve efficiency and effectiveness in business and operational performance.

Bourton Group has supported many businesses from a wide range of industries to implement Lean improvement techniques via tailored engagement programs.

We work collaboratively to deliver on efficiency objectives and targets, with returns on investment of over 20:1 being reported, along with wider benefits of reducing waste, decreasing time to complete activities and improvements to quality - all of which have been directly attributed to Lean.