

Innovation *insights*

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Creating a Culture for Innovation and Improvement: Lessons Learned*

While the focus of many improvement and innovation efforts is often on tools and skills and using a well-known or named approach, a key part of the success in implementing change initiatives is paying attention to the ‘soft skills’. To successfully build a culture for continuous improvement and other change initiatives, people in the organization need to be engaged and a part of the process. In our experience at Penn State, working across the University and its component units, we have found that more successful innovation and improvement initiatives share several fundamental cultural components.

1. Have change initiatives linked to what matters most

Continuous quality improvement (CQI) can’t be an end in itself. It is a means to an end and to be successful, it must be tied to the larger goals of the organization – for example, achieving academic excellence, enhancing student success, reducing bureaucracy, or increasing stakeholder satisfaction. Innovation and improvement approaches can be useful in the implementation of strategic planning goals and strategies. It is important that those in the organization view improvement and innovation as approaches to move the organization from where it is to where it wants to be. Sending this message generates more energy and enthusiasm than using improvement and innovation to fix problems. A future-oriented perspective, talking about leadership and vision, can link individuals to the organization and be a crosswalk between day to day work and the broader organizational goals.

2. Remember that organizations are perfectly designed to get the results they get

If you want to change the results, you need to change the system. As the saying goes, “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.” Look at what the organization values, rewards, and recog-

nizes. Tinkering at the edges of the system without examining the core processes for hiring, evaluating performance, promotion and rewards, will not lead to significant change in the organization. The system must be changed and new behaviors accommodated. Integrate CQI into the core processes of the institution – how you hire, what you reward, what you communicate, how you measure, and how you develop faculty and staff. What gets measured is what gets done, and what’s valued is what is rewarded.

3. Quality is everybody’s business

Leadership needs to champion and support institutional change initiatives. They need to invest time and resources and use their bully pulpit to reinforce the message. Efforts that lack support from the top and depend upon the good will of front line employees to do the right thing because it is the right thing, don’t stand the test of time. Those who are closest to the processes being addressed should be given the education, training, and tools to facilitate change. These are individuals who know what’s working and where there are opportunities for improvement. Customers and stakeholders also have knowledge about where there are opportunities for improvement and should have an input. The organization is there to efficiently use fiscal, physical, and human resources to provide consumers with a service or product.

*This Innovation Insight is adapted from “Creating a Culture for Continuous Improvement: Lessons Learned”, the keynote presentation given by Louise Sandmeyer, Executive Director, Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment, The Pennsylvania State University, at the Advancing Improvement and Innovation conference on October 15, 2008 at the University of Virginia.

4. There is no one best approach – be responsive and flexible

Change initiatives must take into account and respect organizational history and tradition. Organizations are complex and diverse and it is important to understand the organizational culture. There are numerous models and vocabularies for implementing change. A common language and common models can be helpful, but they are tools that need to be adapted to the organization, its culture and its history.

Understand that individuals, like organizations, are at different levels of readiness to embrace change. Recognize all of these variables, start where the group is, and design the approach to fit. Specifically:

- Start where there is interest in beginning an improvement initiative.
- Nurture and support your ‘early adopters’, the ‘scouts’ and ‘pioneers’.
- Don’t make the initiative any more complicated than it needs to be.
- Look for and include improvements that can be ‘quick successes’. Make the first initiatives small enough in scope that the group will be able to see results in a reasonable amount of time.
- Balance the amount of change and stability. Give one round of change enough time to become established before you introduce another one.

5. Communicate and Celebrate

Don’t argue the language of quality or debate whether students are customers; engage in real discussions about improvement. Meet people where they are, not where you think they should be, and give them what they need, not what you think they should have. Communicate and celebrate the small successes in a timely manner. That will provide the energy to move on to longer or more complex projects, and will encourage more people to be involved in the improvement process.

Share information about improvements throughout the organization. Sharing learning may trigger ideas for similar improvement opportunities elsewhere. It will also demonstrate that the organization is serious about moving in this direction and committing resources to improvement, innovation, and change.

6. Adapt and evolve – stay focused on the long term vision and goals

As your approaches to innovation and improvement become established, monitor how the organization, environment, and world around you is adapting and evolving. As the organization becomes more mature in dealing with improvement and innovation, your approaches also need to mature. What’s important is that the organization continues to grow as a learning organization, is able to adapt and is not wedded to any one approach. Focus on the outcomes and results. Listen to the organizational leadership. Keep the momentum going by focusing on long-term goals, listening to all of the organization’s stakeholders, both internal and external, and monitoring the pulse of the organization.

Summary

Weave innovation and improvement into the culture of your organization. The goal of improvement and innovation is not the number of improvement initiatives or CQI teams that have been started. The goal is to be a more effective and efficient learning organization. Incorporating the cultural concepts above, and appreciating the balance between order and change, will make improvement and innovation a part of how people think on a daily basis, and help the organization accomplish its goals and move closer toward achieving its vision.

For more information, contact the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment at 814-863-8721 or psupia@psu.edu, or visit our Web site: <http://www.psu.edu/president/pia>.

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