

CASE STUDY

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

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On a LinkedIn site devoted to the topic of Continuous Improvement, a group member posted the query, "What's the purpose of continuous improvement, Six Sigma and Lean approaches without top management support?" A number of responses were posted; among them,

"Without the support and blessings from top management it's ineffectual."

"Visual presence is an absolute must, and not just as supervisors but actually getting their hands dirty. This shows ownership on their part and this in turn trickles down to the shop floor."

I decided to join the discussion and posted the following response.

Throughout his career, most of Dr. W. Edwards Deming's teaching came across as a "top-down" initiative. To many, the message seemed to be, "Top management, clean up your act and drive this thing!" Toward the end of his life, however, he shifted gears on us. He started to emphasize, "The transformation begins with the individual; all else follows."

Thus, senior managers can't cram statistical methods and quality principles down the throats of their employees. All they can do is provide the opportunity to learn. From there on, the transformation begins with the individual; all else follows. Effective and successful applications of the techniques to accomplish dramatic process improvements will in time earn additional support and resources from senior managers.

Nonetheless, it's always easier to make progress when top management is not only on board, but also leading the transformation effort.

Another group member named Jacque posted, "I am struggling with this at the moment. I have a question... Does anyone have a suggestion as to how to get management to be more supportive?"

I replied to his question as follows:

Jacque, Dr. Deming said the best way to get top management involved and supportive is to "provide education -- education in leadership theory, concepts, methods, profound knowledge." In my experience, I've also seen top management become supportive because of successful efforts to improve processes by people lower in the organization. In other words, they went out and earned the support.

For example, after teaching a client the Quality Support Group's Introduction to DOE workshop, I helped a project team to design an experiment on their CNC machine. None of the factors proved to have a significant effect on the resulting hole diameters; but one factor was machine speed! So, the team was able to just push the pedal to the floor and blast parts through the machine without affecting the quality of the hole dimension, resulting in a 30% increase in throughput. Shortly thereafter, all of the plant's back orders disappeared from the schedule.

To hold the gains of their project, the team submitted three capital requests. I thought that one of the three might get the General Manager's approval. Instead, all three were approved and the GM asked, "Do you need anything else?"

This is one of many cases where I've seen top management support provided because it was earned by the effective application of statistical methods by others. Up to that point, managers thought they were being supportive because they paid for the QSG training. Later, it seemed like management was saying, "Hey, let me catch up so I can lead this effort!"