Continuous Improvement

The term continuous improvement can be very abstract if not placed in a specific context. Continuous improvement is a never-ending strive for perfection in everything you do. In Lean management, continuous improvement is also known as Kaizen.

Kaizen originated in Japan shortly after the end of the Second World War. It gained massive popularity in manufacturing and became one of the foundations of Toyota's rise from a small carmaker to the largest automobile manufacturer on the planet.

In the context of the Lean methodology, continuous improvement seeks to improve every process in the Co-op by focusing on enhancing the activities that generate the most value for your customer while removing as many waste activities as possible and clarifying the work process and creating a routine that is repeated. Repeatable routines provide clarity in the work process, helps build work habits, and creates resilience in a team because everyone is trained on doing the same work process.

It is important to focus on how we are improving the actual work? And how is improving the actual work solving a problem?

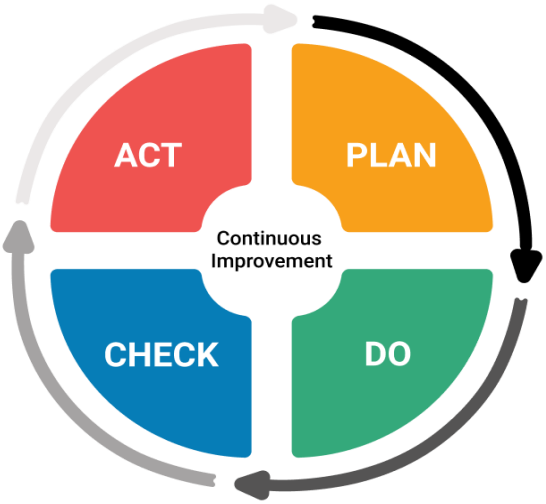
The Visual Stream Mapping is one method to identify problems, bottlenecks and waste in a work process.

Once the problem has been identified, Root Cause Analysis (the 5 whys) is used to determine what is the actual problem that needs to be solved.

Now that we have a specific problem identified, it's time to make a plan.

Plan-Do-Check-Adjust/Act

Process Improvement is about making a plan to address a problem, benchmarking the results and adapting based on the results. Essentially, Plan, Do, Check, and Adjust.



This method can be difficult to achieve because it entails transforming everyone's thinking into an experimentation mindset. Simply put, "Let's try this and see what happens and make adjustments if needed" mindset. This type of mindset demands a higher level of engagement and energy from leaders and their teams. It is easy to continue to do things the way they have always been done. Change is difficult for many employees because it requires a higher level of energy, thinking, and engagement. Change also feels unsteady and puts even the most experienced employee at the beginner level.

The upside of the PDCA process involves the entire team in the process of identifying problems, creating a plan, and adjusting the plan as needed. This increases engagement, employee satisfaction and can improve employee development.

Plan

At this stage, you will literally plan what needs to be done. Depending on the problem, planning can take a major part of your team's efforts. It will usually consist of smaller steps so that you can build a proper plan with fewer possibilities of failure.

Before you move to the next stage, you need to be sure that you answered some basic concerns:

What is the core problem we need to solve?
What resources do we need?
What resources do we have?

What is the best solution for fixing the problem with the available resources?
In what conditions will the plan be considered successful? What are the goals?

Keep in mind, you and your team may need to go through the plan a couple of times before being able to proceed and it's important to maintain open feedback loops to collect enough information before you decide to proceed with the plan.

Do

After you have a plan, it is time to take action. At this stage, you execute your plan. This can include a new repeatable routine and standard of how the work is being done. Be aware that unpredicted problems may occur at this phase. This is why, in a perfect situation, you may first try to incorporate your plan on a small scale and in a controlled environment.

Standardization is something that will definitely help your team apply the plan smoothly. Make sure that everybody knows their roles and responsibilities and what the new routine will look like.

Check
This is probably the most important stage of the PDCA cycle. If you want to clarify your plan, avoid recurring mistakes, and apply continuous improvement successfully, you need to pay enough attention to the **CHECK** phase.

Here, you need to audit your plan's execution and see if your initial plan actually worked. Moreover, your team will be able to identify problematic parts of the current process and eliminate them in the future. If something went wrong during the process, you need to analyze it and find the root cause of the problems.

Adjust/Act
Finally, you arrive at the last stage of the Plan-Do-Check-Adjust/Act cycle. Previously, you developed, applied, and checked your plan. Now, you need to act. If everything seems perfect and your team managed to achieve the original goals, then you can proceed and apply your initial plan.

It can be appropriate to adopt the whole plan if objectives are met. Respectively, your PDCA model will become the new standard baseline. However, every time you repeat a standardized plan, remind your team to go through all steps again and try to improve carefully.

The PDCA cycle is a simple but powerful framework for fixing issues in your department and is a part of a bigger planning process.

The repetitive approach helps your team find and test solutions and improve them through a waste-reducing cycle.

The PDCA process includes a mandatory commitment to continuous improvement, and it can have a positive impact on productivity and efficiency.

Finally, keep in mind that the PDCA model requires a certain amount of time, and it may not be appropriate for solving urgent issues.

Examples of steps on a plan:

- An update routine that can be repeated by all team members
- Reorganization of a workstation that puts the items and tools in the order in which they are used
- Utilizing the 5s steps to organize, set, clean and standardize a workstation or a work process routine
- Training plan for all employees involved in the new work process
- Goals and metrics to help with knowing if improvement was made

5 S's

The 5S is a lean method for workspace and work process optimization. It consists of 5 consecutive steps that allow any team to organize their workplace for maximum process efficiency. 5S stands for:

Sort
Separate required tools, materials, and instructions from those that are not needed. Remove everything that is not necessary from the work area.

Set in Order
Sort and organize all tools, equipment, files, data, material, and resources for quick, easy location, and use. Label all storage locations, tools, and equipment.

Shine
Set standards for cleanliness. Clean and remove all trash, grease, and dirt. Cleanliness provides a safe workplace and makes potential problems noticeable (e.g., equipment leaks, loose parts, loose paperwork, or materials).

Standardize
Engage the workforce to systematically perform steps 1, 2, and 3 above daily to maintain the workplace in perfect condition as a standard process. Establish schedules and set expectations for adherence.

Sustain
Build organizational commitment so that 5S becomes one of your organizational values so that everyone can turn it into a habit.

5S is a great way to minimize waste. It recognizes that every tool needs to have a specific place that allows the team to find it quickly, use it and return it to the same location. 5S protects the workplace from getting cluttered with unnecessary equipment.

It is effective in reducing the wastes of:

- Motion – by reducing the distance covered to acquire a tool
- Waiting – by minimizing the time wasted waiting for a tool to be acquired
- Inventory – by removing any unnecessary equipment from the workplace

5S is a great way to maintain discipline in your team and increase the built-in quality of their work. With 5S you can:

- Sort the necessary from unnecessary tools for your team.
- Minimize process wastes by organizing your work environment.
- Keep your equipment in a perfect state and utilize it to the full potential.
- Standardize your work process.
- Sustain any changes that you've implemented and set yourself up for continuous improvement.