Success Factors of Incremental Improvements

Introduction

The following document describes the factors of success when incorporating Incremental Improvements into an organization. Incremental Improvements is part of many improvement theories including Kaizen, which is briefly explained. The benefits of using Incremental Improvements is discussed in the document "Benefits of Incremental Improvements".

This article is a continuation of the Benefits of Incremental Improvements. Both articles include an Overview of Kaizen and Incremental Improvements. Kindly skip those two sections if you have previously read those sections in the Benefits of Incremental Improvements article.

Overview

Kaizen is an approach where a company is dedicated to ongoing improvements. The word Kaizen in Japanese means "change for better" or "improvement". Most companies would likely agree that doing small consistent changes towards improvement would benefit their organization. However, my experience is that most companies, and people for that matter, have conflicting demands that prevents them from executing and completing those changes.

For changes to be considered Kaizen the improvements need to have two components which are Incremental and On-going. This document discusses the success factors of Incremental Improvements.

Incremental Improvements

Incremental Improvements are transformations that are constant and change the organization for the better. The "constant" portion of the improvement relates to constantly examining areas that require improvement and not to make change for change sake. As one change is made and implemented for the betterment of the organization then then next change is initiated. Thus the concept of On-going, or constant, Incremental Improvements.

The improvements can relate to improving a product/service or a procedure within the organization. There are three (3) main types of improvements and they are; House Keeping (cleaning, sorting, keeping things orderly), Waste Elimination and Standardization. An organization can categorize their Incremental Improvements within these three categories.

Factors for Success

There are various factors that are required to allow Incremental Improvements to be successful at an organization. These include:

- Management Support
- Schedule Tasks
- Lessons Learned
- Focused Resources
- Celebrate Wins
- Bring in External Resources as Required
- Focus on one Change at a Time

Management Support

Have you ever lived in a house undergoing renovations? It's noisy, dusty and you have contractors walking around your house and parking in your driveway. It's fine to want to a new kitchen but if you're not willing to live through the construction then you aren't committed.

Incremental Improvements are like living in a house going through renovations. Resource constraints, changes that cause short term pain and some additional expenditures may cause management to question if Incremental Improvements are positive to the organization. Management must support the initiative and continue with the improvements to achieve the results required for the company. No change can occur without some type of disruption.

Schedule Tasks

To achieve consistent results tasks must be scheduled. People can not hope to find the time to complete the work. One person I know says "Hope is not a strategy." Resources need to be held accountable for timelines and due dates.

Scheduling can be straightforward with the Incremental Improvement process since only a small amount of improvements is to be worked on at one time. When an improvement is implemented then a new improvement is scheduled. This allows schedulers to use current experience to improve the scheduling process.

If it's not scheduled, then the improvements won't be completed in a timely manner.

Lessons Learned

As with any type of initiative positive and negative lessons should be discussed and documented. This improves the overall Incremental Improvement process for an organization and can also indicate areas of strengths and areas of weaknesses. Identify the positive lessons and build those into future incentives. Identify steps that did not turn out as planned and determine changes that would improve, mitigate or remove the negative impact from occurring.

Someone once said "Experience helps make good decisions and experience is gained by making mistakes." Don't hide mistakes, learn from them.

Focused Resources

Distraction is one of the biggest challenges in the workplace today. For Incremental Improvements to be successful resources must be persistent and battle through resistance and obstacles. Allowing resistance to dominate an initiative will cause time delays, increase cost, decrease morale and may cause some tasks not be completed at all.

Stay focused on the task at hand.

Celebrate Wins

It's important to celebrate achievements. Incremental Improvements are most successful when people in the organization are aware of its occurrence. Momentum will be lost if initiatives are performed in a backroom without anyone knowing. Celebrating the achievements reminds everyone how capable, successful and important their teams are to the organization.

The celebration can be as simple as an email to the management group, team members and those that benefit from the improvement. The information can be shared on company newsletters and internal websites.

Why do sports teams hang championship banners in their stadiums and arenas? It's to remember their accomplishments and remind them that they are winners. Remind your organization that they are winners by celebrating the wins.

External Resources

There are many cases of organizations making improvements and losing momentum because they lack expertise in an area. Bring in external resources as required. Think of how many homes have small projects that are unfinished because someone thought that they could pull off a task where a tradesperson is required. Use external resources for their expertise and experience. This also adds to the learning process and the organization can gain momentum with some fresh energy.

Focus on one Major Change at a Time

By focusing on one major change at a time the organization can implement the change quicker and with less distraction. There are times when combining a few changes together may benefit the organization such as when you bring in external resources. However, in most cases the objective is to stay focused and implement the change. Smaller changes can be combined to gain some quick wins and generate some momentum.

Organizations that have been challenged with completing improvements may want to focus on some tasks that can be accomplished easily. Every professional sports league allows their teams to have pre-season games to work out any issues. Set yourself up to win by choosing a task that can be accomplished and get some checkmarks in the win column.

Conclusion

Incremental Improvements can provide enormous benefits for an organization. When performed correctly it improves efficiencies and morale. It builds the knowledge base in the organization. Benefits can be realized more timely as changes can be implemented efficiently. Executing the success factors will provide the organization with a foundation to replicate Incremental Improvements effectively throughout the organization.