The SUPER adVISOR ™

Real-World Solutions for Employee Management

Foster a culture of continuous process improvement

The concept of process improvement has traditionally been applied in manufacturing industries to identify, analyze, and improve existing production processes to meet new goals or objectives.

Lean, Six Sigma, TQM and BPM are all methodologies for reviewing these processes from start to finish with the goal of improving the processes to save time and money and raise efficiency and effectiveness.

Proponents of these methodologies advocate for their use not as a short-term way of increasing efficiency, but as lenses with which to view continuous improvement.

As a result, process improvement theories have extended beyond the manufacturing floor, and many companies across various industries have embraced these concepts to increase profits and customer satisfaction.

Since no single methodology works in every situation, companies generally choose the method that best fits their type of industry and company culture. Some companies adopt specific formal

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Supervisor Pullout

Employee vacations can pay off

August marks the final dog days of summer, but that doesn't mean it's too late to encourage employees to take vacation.

Studies abound touting the restorative properties of vacation. Yet, Americans are not taking time away from work, even when their employers provide paid time off.

The workers aren't the only ones losing out. Unused PTO that is allowed to roll over and accrue is carried on an employer's balance sheet as liability because often it is paid out when an employee leaves the company.

Such was the case at the U.S. Travel Association, which had launched Project: Time Off, an initiative to prove the benefits of taking time off from work. Deciding that they should lead by example, the CEO soon discovered that his organization was terrible at going on vacation.

At the end of 2013, his 55-person team had accrued so much unused PTO that the association was carrying $353,000 in vacation liability — more than $6,400 per staffer. The CEO took action, offering a $500 bonus for employees who used all their vacation time. The incentive was accompanied by regular communication about the importance of taking time off.

The plan worked. In 2014, 91 percent of U.S. Travel employees used all their vacation, compared to 19 percent the year before. The association cut its liability by $36,345, and it had one of its best years, attributing the increased revenues to the benefits of vacation.

Not every company is able to provide a bonus to incentivize employees to take vacation, but regular communication promoting the importance of vacation might make a difference. Sometimes reminding employees that they should use the time they are given is all the encouragement they need. ♦

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'improvement'
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programs for continuous improvement, while others take a more informal grassroots approach and apply tools from multiple theories.

Whichever methodology you choose for evaluating and improving your company processes, consider the following tips to help ensure success:

Align improvement goals with core values. To create buy-in for continuous improvement, an organization should align process improvement projects with core values.

Changing an established process is often difficult, and if there doesn't appear to be a reason for the change, it can be difficult to get people on board. It helps to answer the question, how does this activity/process change support our end goal?

Educate the workforce. One of the ways you can mitigate resistance to change is to implement it from the ground up. Provide ongoing training opportunities, and communicate your desire for continuous process improvement to your workers.

Teach workers how to identify opportunities for process improvement in their day-to-day activities and throughout other areas in the company. Then, encourage them to make suggestions for improvement projects to management.

Encourage supervisors to identify processes in their own departments that could use improvements, and encourage them to make changes to processes that are under their control.

Provide an anonymous suggestion box. Sometimes even when you encourage employees to present new ideas, they can remain fearful that speaking up could result in discipline. Other times, an employee will not have enough confidence in a good idea to share it publicly.

Providing a way for employees to anonymously submit suggestions could make some employees more apt to contribute.

Use a consistent approach. A consistent and structured approach for project identification and execution will provide the organization with the ability to more easily identify, select, and manage continuous improvement projects. The process should also provide the opportunity to evaluate the methodology used.

Measure and follow up. You cannot know if a process is improved without measuring it. During each project, determine how improvement will be measured and then follow up on the process after six months and again after a year.

Continuous process improvement applies to these processes as well. Make sure you are continually reviewing your strategy for process improvement to make it most effective. ♦

Training repayment may ensure return on investment

Employee training can sometimes seem like a risky proposition. Smaller companies especially might be torn between the desire to ensure that their employees are well-equipped to excel in their jobs and the fear that these employees will leave and take their newly learned skills to another company — possibly even a competitor.

One way some employers help protect their investment is by having employees sign a repayment agreement for company provided training. Where training is exten-

sive and could easily be transferred to another job, repayment agreements are more common — especially if the employee could have taken the training elsewhere (e.g., attended technical college).

For example, if a trucking company invests in training new drivers, but is concerned some new hires will quit within six months to work for a competitor, the company might consider an agreement for repaying the training costs.

The terms of repayment will depend on an evaluation of an employer's particular turnover risks, but generally most companies require repayment if the employee quits within two years or less, and the repayment is usually a graduated amount that reduces over time.

To continue the truck driver example, an employer that requires

repayment if the employee quits within six months might find that employees wait and quit after seven months. Instead the company might require repayment of the full training cost if the employee quits within six months, repayment of two-thirds of the cost if he or she quits within 12 months, and repayment of one-third of the cost if he or she quits within 18 months.

This graduated approach is more likely to survive a potential legal challenge than an agreement which appears onerous. For example, if the company required repaying the full cost if an employee quits within three years, questions might arise as to whether the agreement is reasonable, or whether the company could have recouped the training investment within that term of employment. ♦

Identifying areas for improvement

The concept of process improvement has traditionally been applied in manufacturing industries. In the past few decades, however, the theory has extended beyond manufacturing, and many companies across various industries have applied the concept to procedures, workflows, or projects to increase profits and customer satisfaction.

If you have been tasked with looking for ways to improve processes in your department, it can be challenging to know where to start.

The first step to determining if a process is a good candidate for improvement is to fully understand what it entails. Supervisors who skip this step can spend a lot of time trying to make changes that may not be needed, or trying to revise a process that involves other departments and needs to be examined as a bigger picture.

When determining what areas could use improvement, ask:

- How many people does this process affect?

- How much time do people spend working on tasks within the current process?

- Is the process painful? Is it always a struggle to get finished?

- Has the process been in place for a long time? Is this the way it's always been done? Has management changed?

- What can be gained by spending time working to improve this process? (This should be measurable: time, money, etc.)

- What other teams or processes would be impacted by changes to the current process, and how? Would those impacts be negative?

- Would the benefit of improving the process justify the time spent working to improve it?

Once a process has been identified for improvement, a methodology is generally applied to evaluate the process. For example, Lean, the concept pioneered by Toyota in the 1980s, focuses on the elimination of waste. An ideal Lean process is one which provides "perfect value" to the customer by eliminating all non-value-add activities from a given process.

For purposes of illustration, let's use a Lean methodology to look at the next steps in process improvement.

Assemble a team. The size of the team will depend upon the scope of the process you have selected, but it should include: A leader who has a stake in the outcome of the project and is responsible

Tag team vacations

According to Project: Time Off, the number of annual vacation days Americans use has steadily declined. From 1976 to 2000, U.S. workers used 20.3 days of vacation each year. In 2013, workers reported using only 16 days — almost a full workweek less than decades earlier.

Two of the main reasons workers cite for not using available paid time off is that they fear they will be viewed negatively as not being "committed" to their jobs, or that there will be too much work waiting for them when they return from vacation.

One of the ways you can address these concerns and reassure employees that vacations are not only allowed, but also encouraged and supported, is to work with your team to create a sort of "Vacation Bill of Rights." Here are some suggested promises:

- We will lose our guilt over taking time off.

- When vacations are planned, we will prepare in advance to cover the work of team members, just as they will support us when we take vacation.

- We will trust colleagues to follow through on our behalf.

- We will not engage in discussions that suggest that working while on vacation is expected, acceptable, or a best practice.

- We will not call coworkers on vacation, except in a true emergency. ♦

for selecting the team members, scheduling meetings, and the completion of the action items; a facilitator who is familiar with Lean methodology; employees who perform the process that is being evaluated; and an employee who is not involved with the process to act as fresh eyes and ask questions about the process to identify waste.

Map out the existing process. The team should break down each step in the process as much as possible so that each step is clearly identified on a project board.

One of the easiest ways to set up a project board is to use a whiteboard or large piece of paper and sticky notes. Each sticky note can represent a single step of the process (and can easily be moved and adjusted during discussion). This is a good way for everyone to visualize what the process looks like and understand how each step fits together. This can be especially helpful for the employee who is serving as fresh eyes on the process.

Identify areas of opportunity surrounding the process. The team analyzes the current process searching for areas that could be streamlined. One Lean tool used for this is the Eight Wastes.

The team looks at each task that is mapped in the process and asks if it includes any of the following wastes: unused or underused human talent, waiting (people waiting for things to arrive), inventory (things waiting to be worked), transportation (moving people and/or things), defects (things that are not right and need fixing), motion (unnecessary human movement), overproduction (too much stuff or stuff too early), or processing waste (tasks that must be performed, but that don't add value to the tasks that are supposed to be performed).

Decide on a new process. Once all the opportunities for improvement have been identified, the team can work to create a streamlined process. The new process is then communicated to everyone who is impacted by the change.

Review. Since the goal is continuous improvement, the new process should be reviewed for efficiency six months after it has been in place to see if there has been a measured improvement. If adjustments to the process are needed, they should be made. The process should be reviewed again in a year. ◆

Develop a personal strategy for building resiliency

Resiliency, the ability to adapt in the face of adversity and bounce back from difficult experiences or failures, has become a much-desired trait that companies seek when hiring or promoting leaders for their organizations.

According to the American Psychological Association, however, research has shown that resilience is not an inherent trait that people possess, but more of a practiced process that involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed by anyone.

People don't all respond the same way to traumatic and stressful life events, so building resilience is a personal journey that requires an individual approach. The association suggests some of the following tactics when developing a personal strategy to build resilience:

Make connections. Accepting help and support from those who care about you can help you through difficult times. Solid relationships with family members, friends, or coworkers can give you a support network to call upon in times of need.

Keep things in perspective. You can't prevent all stressful events from occurring, but you can control how you interpret and respond to them. When facing situations that seem insurmountable, try to consider the situation in a broader context and keep a long-term view.

Break larger goals down into smaller tasks. Do something regularly to move toward your goals, even if it seems like a small accomplishment. Instead of focusing on goals that seem unachievable, ask, "What's one thing I can accomplish today that helps me move toward my target goal?"

Accept change. Sometimes specific objectives may no longer be attainable because of adverse events. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on things that you can alter or influence.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. Considering past experiences and your reactions to challenging life events can help you develop confidence in your ability to solve problems and adapt in difficult situations. This discovery can help you respond more effectively to future events. Think about the answers to these types of questions: What have I learned about myself and my interactions with others during difficult times? How have I been able to overcome previous obstacles? ◆

Strategies for minimizing unconscious bias in hiring

Cognitive bias is a very natural part of human nature. The human mind craves order and automatically seeks to put information into categories, filling in the blanks with cognitive shortcuts that can cause irrational conclusions.

For example, the tendency to hear only the information that confirms our preconceived notions about a topic is called confirmation bias, while anchoring bias occurs when people rely too heavily on the first piece of information they hear.

Overcoming such bias can be difficult. Even people who can recognize irrational thinking in others have a difficult time seeing it in themselves (this is called blind spot bias). But because unconscious bias can lead to stereotyping and potentially unfair employment practices, it is important to make every effort to mitigate its effect on the interview process.

Psychologists have determined that some of these biases can be corrected by applying a deliberate process to decision making. Try these approaches to help you neutralize your cognitive bias when making hiring decisions:

Use an interview team. One of the best ways to mitigate unconscious bias is to consider more than one point of view. This can be accomplished by having multiple people interview the candidate separately or together as a panel. Sometimes the best results are achieved when the candidate first meets with the supervisor separately and then with the rest of the team as a group. Each member of a hiring team should spend between 30 and 40 minutes interviewing a candidate, while a group interview should last at least an hour. The interviewers should compare notes about the candidate shortly after the interviews when perceptions are fresh.

Be careful with candidates you like best. There is a natural tendency to choose candidates based on likability and similarity to ourselves. But when supervisors look only for employees with a similar background and working style as the rest of the team, it is possible to overlook qualified candidates because they wouldn't "fit in" with the rest of the group. It may be helpful to assign one team member the task of playing devil's advocate when you discuss the candidates as a group.

Use a ranking system. Have each interviewer assign an overall grade or rank to the candidate based on an agreed-upon weighted system. For example, you might choose to measure skills, experience, and cultural fit. A hiring decision should be made by adding up the grades given by each person on the hiring team; the applicant with the highest ranking gets the job. Grades in the assessment categories should always be supported with facts, and you should refrain from using veto power over the hiring decision.

Understand the job description. Everyone involved in the hiring process should know the history of the job, exactly what purpose it serves (what are the most important duties, tasks and projects), and how success in the position will be measured.

Use standardized criteria. Use the job description as a way to determine what qualifications and skills you are looking for in a candidate. Use these criteria to determine some base standardized questions that you will ask each applicant, so you can more objectively compare answers. Research shows that unstructured interviews are one of the worst predictors of future job performance.

Focus on skills. When possible, have applicants complete skills assessments as part of the hiring process. Focusing on skills can help mitigate any preconceived notions about candidates. A study through the Clayman Institute of Gender Studies at Stanford found that the number of female musicians in orchestras increased from 5 percent to 25 percent in the 1970s when judges began blind auditioning musicians behind screens. ♦

Test Yourself

An employee has been arrested

On Monday morning you found out that Bill, one of your most reliable employees, was arrested over the weekend and is still in jail. Your initial reaction is to find out more information about the circumstances surrounding the arrest and give Bill the opportunity to explain, but now it is Wednesday and he still hasn't been released. You don't know the details of the pending charges, but it sounds like Bill's incarceration may be ongoing. In the meantime, you need someone to do Bill's job. Can you terminate his employment and hire a replacement? **For the answer, turn to page 4s.** ♦

Test Yourself Solution

Focus on absence, not arrest

Because an arrest is not proof that a crime was committed, employers are discouraged (and in some states prohibited) from taking adverse action against an employee or applicant based on an arrest alone. Instead, employers are encouraged to examine the conduct underlying an arrest, allow for explanation, and then evaluate the situation to determine if an adverse action would be considered both job related and consistent with business necessity.

In this case, however, the arrest itself is not the issue so much as the prolonged absence from work.

Employers are not required to excuse absences for employees who cannot report to work while in jail. If Bill will be in jail for an extended period of time, no law requires you to hold his job.

You could terminate his employment and hire a replacement. ♦

On a High Note
Flying above expectations …

Earlier this summer, with schools shuttering for the season and family travel just getting into full swing, the Tampa Bay Times ran a short story about outstanding customer service at the local airport.

According to the newspaper article, a 6-year-old boy who was traveling with his family to Houston had accidentally left his beloved stuffed tiger, Hobbes, in the Tampa airport.

The boy was distraught when he realized the toy was missing and his mother called the airport to see if the tiger could be found. She explained to the airport staff that Hobbes is a one-of-a-kind stuffed animal, handcrafted by the boy's aunt.

Luckily, the airport janitorial staff was able to locate the plush toy. The operations manager, however, decided to take the rescue mission a step further … and took the tiger on an adventure throughout the airport.

The manager photographed the stuffed animal at the air traffic control tower, working out at the employee gym, hanging out with airport firefighters, treating himself to some gelato, and even lounging at the Marriott pool and playing a game of Jenga.

When the family returned from Houston, the boy was not only reunited with his fuzzy pal, but also was surprised with a gift — a scrapbook of Hobbes' airport adventure.

The manager had written a short story to accompany the photos and had combined them in a hardbound book for the stuffed tiger's owner.

The boy was delighted, the parents were moved to tears with gratitude … and a small human interest story about customer service got picked up by every major news outlet and became an Internet sensation.

It's that last part that is curious. Why was the story so popular? Yes, the tale is heartwarming, but newspapers run such stories every day. The scrapbook idea isn't original; the airport manager himself said he was inspired by a similar idea where someone took a stuffed animal around a museum. So what makes the article so compelling?

Answer: Because it's the airport.

The airport is not the Ritz-Carlton, and fair or not, airport employees are not generally world-renowned for their skills in guest relations. Yet, this airport employee felt inspired to provide remarkable customer service under entirely average circumstances (How many kids lose stuffed animals at the airport every day?). It's unexpected, and that makes it news.

The unexpected inspires

Part of the Tampa airport mission is "to create … extraordinary customer experiences through our people and facilities…" While this operations manager presumably strives to meet this goal every day through the performance of his job, on this particular day, he used his personal time to go beyond his job description to meet the mission.

It is all too easy to get mired in the day-to-day tasks of a job and not think about the more inspiring vision or mission for your company or department. But as a manager, you help set the tone in your workplace, and even when you think no one else is watching, you are always leading by example.

This manager might have considered that he could inspire Tampa airport employees to think about how they treat the thousands of customers who walk through their doors every day, but it is unlikely he could have predicted the positive influence the story would generate across the country.

Your actions always a ripple effect. What impact could you have if you chose to demonstrate unexpected delight in your job? ♦

Do Your Supervisors Know…

…how to define and measure cultural fit?

Have you ever walked into a meeting on casual Friday and found two or more employees wearing the same (or similarly themed) graphic t-shirts? Would you be able to carpool with your coworkers to a university alumni meeting? Do you regularly run into colleagues at the same stores, restaurants, or entertainment venues?

It's arguably human nature to want to surround ourselves with people who are like us. We unconsciously tend to gravitate toward like-minded individuals with similar hobbies and backgrounds, so it isn't surprising that hiring in some ways can be a bit like choosing friends. After all, there is certainly a lot to be said for the cohesive teamwork that can be achieved when coworkers get along.

But when recruiters and hiring managers look only for employees with a similar background and working style as the rest of the team, it can create a culture of sameness in a company where talented potential candidates are disqualified because they wouldn't "fit in" with the rest of the group.

Cultural fit, warns Lauren A. Rivera, an associate professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, "has become a new form of discrimination that keeps demographic and cultural diversity down, all in the name of employee enjoyment and fun."

In her New York Times op-ed titled "Guess Who Doesn't Fit In at Work," Rivera goes on to say that cultural fit can work, but personal similarity among colleagues is not the key.

She asserts that organizations that use cultural fit for a competitive advantage in hiring have a culture that is aligned with business goals, and they use measurable data to understand what types of traits and behaviors predict on-the-job success.

Companies that want to use cultural fit as part of hiring criteria, but also want the advantages in skill, employee retention, innovation, and profit that a diverse workforce can provide, should consider the following:

Clearly define your culture. What is your company strategy, vision, and mission? What is your organizational pace? How do decisions get made in your company? What specific employee behaviors or traits best support the organizational style and goals?(i.e., Who is successful in your company, and why?)

Consistently communicate culture. While it is important for potential employees to know your company culture during recruitment endeavors, don't forget to engage with current employees as well. Communicating your core values and mission can help reinforce commonalities and shared perspectives instead of focusing on personal similarities.

Create formal procedures to measure fit. Don't leave the fit assessment up to the gut feeling of the hiring manager. When left without a tool for measurement, humans tend to define merit in their own image.

Consider using skills tests and personality assessments in addition to interviews. Use a standardized interview process, and incorporate behavior-based questions that related to the company's core values. Also consider multiple interviews or panel interviews, so more than one person's point of view is taken into account.

Provide guidance on weighing criteria. Understanding how to weigh criteria when choosing the best candidate is not intuitive for most hiring managers.

Don't just tell interviewers what qualities or traits would best fit within the company culture. Also provide guidance about how to weigh these different qualities, and how to weigh them against other qualifications like skill, knowledge, and experience. Too often, employees are hired because of charisma and likability, which end up being poor indicators of future performance.

These simple strategies can go a long way toward increasing not only the diversity of hires in your organization, but also to creating the kind of company culture that will make those hires feel like they fit right in. ♦

Tips to keep your employee handbook up-to-date

There is no law that requires employers to provide a company handbook to employees. However, supplying your workforce with written communication that provides an overview of company policies and procedures is generally considered a best practice.

An employee handbook ensures that important information (e.g., health benefits, disciplinary policies, and vacation accrual) is consistently shared with all workers. It also provides a ready resource for referencing such information when questions arise.

For your handbook to effectively serve its intended purposes, however, it needs to be kept current. Review your employee handbook on an annual basis, and consider the following when you make updates:

Evolving laws and relevant information

You probably already re-evaluate your company policies every time a law changes to ensure that your company remains in operational compliance with local, state, and federal laws. However, do you always remember to review how that policy is communicated in the employee handbook?

Since a handbook is generally only a condensed outline of policies, it doesn't need to include the details for every internal procedure related to a change in law. It does, however, need to include the information that directly affects employees.

For example, as of March 27, 2015, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) recognizes same-sex marriage for purposes of leave under the Act, regardless of whether the marriage is legally recognized by the state in which the couple resides. (Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Nebraska are currently exempt from this law due to a court injunction.)

Since this particular change directly affects employees' eligibility for leave under the FMLA, you'll want to make sure your handbook is updated so employees are aware of their evolving rights.

Trends in technology

The evolution of law is not the only change that might prompt a review of your handbook. If, for example, your employee handbook was written or updated even as recently as five years ago, it is now likely woefully out-of-date with regard to technology in the workplace.

From National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) rulings regarding allowable employee use of social media, to the workplace questions presented by advancements in portable and wearable technology (e.g., smartphones, Apple Watch, and Google Glass), policies with a technology component are likely to remain challenging for employers.

Since it is difficult for employees to comply with rules that they don't know exist (and harder yet for you to take appropriate disciplinary action when such rules are violated), you will want to regularly review your technology-related policies to stay in step with current laws as well as best practices in your industry.

Internal changes

Outside forces like evolving laws and trends in technology might seem like the most pressing catalysts for updating company policies and communicating them to employees, but don't overlook the potential impact of miscommunicated internal changes.

Have you recently changed the process for requesting time off? Is there a difference in the way vacation is accrued or holiday pay is determined? Sometimes these changes are communicated to employees when they happen, but the policies and procedures are not immediately addressed in the employee handbook, often leaving employees without an easy reference.

Promptly review the handbook sections related to any changing policies. This will ensure continuity in the way information is presented to employees and may prevent any later confusion. ♦

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