

Five Steps to Improve Productivity

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Some may say they do not need to worry about productivity because they are not required to make a report. While this may appear to be true on the surface, this mindset is destined to fail. At some point, we are all asked to justify what we do, why we need certain resources, and to validate that we are capable of handling the job.

So what is productivity? Ask 10 different people and you will get 10 different answers. In economics, productivity is the ratio of what is produced to what is required to produce it. If two businesses make the same product with the same quality, quantity, and type of raw materials, then the company that produces the most goods in the same time period is the most productive.

A Step-By-Step Approach

Most of us see the relevance of improving productivity within our departments. When we talk about improving our productivity, we may become enamored with the gurus of our day. We believe that what they are saying is something new, improved, or even an advancement in thinking. In some cases this is correct, but in most cases they are simply restating time-tested practices—just repackaging them.

Think of all the how-to books you have read in your life. Most of them are filled with simple logic and common sense. The same is true for productivity improvement. There have been very few advances in business management practice or in human resource management. Most advances are technological. But newer, faster computers that allow us to multi-task and automate some processes are not the silver bullet to solving all our problems. We still need to utilize good management

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skills to ensure that we continue to improve what we are doing today with our current resources.

Step 1: Establish Metrics

Until you know your business, you will never be able to improve anything. Understanding all the variables involved in producing your product is essential. Once this is accomplished, your baselines can be established. This is the most time-consuming task. The established baseline then will become the benchmark you use to measure your improvements.

For example, in a service department you may need to determine the number of service calls a technician, on average, can complete in a certain work period. Likewise, in a manufacturing department, you may need to establish the average number of products created in a work period.

Take a step back and look at your industry, listen to the competition. What norms does your industry try to track? What metric system does your competition sales rely upon, i.e. return-on-investment (ROI), number of processes error free, number of patients seen? From this, you can get a sense of what the industry values and what they see as telling signs of your productivity.

Step 2: Identify Key Improvement Areas

Once you have defined your work and identified your norms, you can then determine the key areas you wish to address in your first improvement process. To do this, you will need to understand the big picture.

Identifying how and where you fit into the organization is a key consideration. Knowing how your department impacts the organization's bottom-line numbers, profit, cost of goods, and productivity is the next step. Once you understand your role in the organization, you can focus on the processes within your department that have the greatest impact on the organization.

Before completing this task, sit down with your supervisor and find out what concerns him/her and how he/she is evaluating your job. Then sit down with your subordinates and address their concerns. This information will help you spend your time wisely and help you focus on the main concerns first.

Step 3: Understand the Processes Involved

Take time to understand the process you are trying to improve. Follow the process from start to finish and map out all the touch points (who does what and when). Think about the resources involved (time, materials, etc.). Understand the specific skill sets required for the process to be completed appropriately (i.e. can the task be done by a junior technician?).

Once you understand the process, you can find a better way to make improvements. You may find that you employ too many people and the job is better done with less staff, which would free up labor resources for other tasks. You may find that you do not have enough quality controls built in, or you have over engineered a simple process. Now is the appropriate time to ask those hard questions: Why do we do it this way? Could somebody else do this job? Can this task be farmed out to a strategic partner? You need to look objectively at what you do and evaluate it. Once you have asked yourself the hard questions, you can build a plan to make advancements.

Step 4: Be a Champion for the Cause

Now that you know what you are dealing with and how you can make it better, it is necessary to assess everyone's involvement and convince them to "buy-into" your new process. Do not try to get a room full of cheerleaders. Be content with a room full of willing skeptics. Let the new plan be the thing that converts agnostics into believers. Remember that it is normal for people to see it before they can believe it, so be content to have willing people.

If you have those who are hostile to the changes, try to ease their concerns. In most cases, their resistance has more to do with their insecurity than your new idea. If persuasion and reason is ineffective with them, then they may need to be removed from the team to ensure that the program is given a fair shot to survive. You will need to spend a great deal of time talking through people's questions and concerns.

Make sure you over communicate your intentions with this new process and be specific. Let them know what the end goal is for the project, what is required of them, what resources they will have for the job, and what is the duration of the test period. Chances are you will have to repeat yourself often before everyone can begin to see your vision.

Most process improvements fail in the communication portion of the project. Either the vision is not communicated effectively or the champion for the improve-

ment has not thought through all of the issues they will have to face to be successful. Success then comes down to clear and detailed communication.

Step 5: Analyze the Results

Now that everyone has given the project a fair shot, study your new results and compare them to your previous outcomes. Are they better? If not, then it is time to rethink your strategy. Always be honest with your team. Share the results and let them know that you are committed to the outcome and that this process is not another "pet project." If people can trust you and if they can see this as an honest attempt to be better, then they will be willing to give you a fair shot on future endeavors.

With successful results behind you, it is time to ask another question: Can you do better? Spend some time understanding the data arriving from your new process. Study it carefully and be confident that you have a process that is realistic. Make your changes when everyone is expecting to restructure. If you are satisfied with your results, congratulations! Now you need to ensure consistent compliance to the new process.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, there is no magic pill for fixing or improving your department. It is nothing more than good old-fashioned common sense, which is not so common as it would seem. Keep in mind that process improvement never technically ends. Once you complete one cycle, you find yourself back at the beginning asking yourself how you can improve on what you are now doing. If you want to be successful in business, you will need to make many positive changes in your department or company.

Do not be afraid of adapting; it is inevitable. Instead, try to position yourself to dictate the change in your department. This will position you to ensure your change is based on what is best for you, your staff, your department, your customers, and your company. Don't get caught asleep; then change will be forced upon you because the market dictates it. Let change happen because it will make you better—better with your resources, better to your clients, better with your staff, and consequently better for you. ■

We welcome your comments.

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