

// Coaching For Sustainability!

Most of us today are completely comfortable with understanding and using our Lean and Six Sigma tools for developing new processes and gaining control of our data. We get to practice them daily and for the most part, it's not really that hard to use the tools! What is difficult beyond belief is actually implementing and sustaining the new processes and changes our teams come up with during their events and projects for the long-term!

I've now lead, facilitated, and/or coached almost 700 improvement projects around the world now as a Master Black Belt Sensei. I've trained and certified 73 Master Black Belts, with three more in a current training wave. I've experienced much of the sustainability issues first hand and have struggled with them just like you! Because of that experience, I've learned that there are techniques you can use and structure you can put into place to go from a 60% to 80% failure rate for new ideas, to a 70%+ rate of success for sustaining new ideas and changes for 12 months or longer. The real key to all of this is what happens **after** the event!

Failure Mode 1: Believing that the things discussed in the Project Out-Brief will happen just because they are good ideas and everybody "liked it"! This is the most common failure mode and the one that is easiest to overcome. The main problem is that people believe that they can "get things done" **on top of** what they are already doing. Forgive me, but very few people show up to our events "looking for something to do". Without exception, getting the people you need is like pulling teeth! They are already so busy with their regular jobs that they often have a problem attending the project meetings. And we think they are going to have all kinds of time to put the changes in place? Far from it! We have to adapt an "**instead of**" approach if we are going to have any chance of success. Just like when these people go on vacation or are out sick, somebody should be covering for their work. If there is nobody, shame on you! That is simply poor management 101. Actively find someone who can cover for your/their schedule a couple of hours a day or for a 4-hour block during the week so that you have specific dedicated time to work on your Action Items. Waiting until you have "free time" is a plan to fail!

Failure Mode 2: Having a poor (or worse, no) effective Communications Plan! I've lost track of how many times a Team Lead has told me "I'll just send out an e-mail to let people know what we're doing"...People! E-mail is great to transmit status, provide proof you did or said something (CYA of the first magnitude), and for reaching out to friends to make informal plans. However, e-mail is horrible for communicating information! Everyone who is going to use or be affected by the new changes to the process needs to get first-hand information about the Who, What, When, Where, How, and How Often so that they not only know what to do when the time comes, but they know when to do it as well. Do not just read PowerPoint bullets "at" them or give them a hand-out! Make your communications personal and tailor it to how each person wants to receive information. Make it hands-on; let them do a simulation of the new process. Walk them through it and have them "work through" the new way so that they can generate questions and develop a solid situational awareness of what is going to change, what they specifically are going to need to do differently, and when these changes actually take place. Just telling people that something is going to change is another gold-plated road to failure.

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Failure Mode 3: Having little or no effective accountability. This is most often reflected in identifying who is responsible for each Action Item. If more than one person is listed, or worse, “the team” is listed, you are truly on track to fail spectacularly! As Admiral Hyman Rickover once famously stated, “If you can’t put your finger in the bellybutton of the person responsible, NO ONE is responsible!” He was precisely correct. When responsibility is shared, accountability disappears. More than one person may be required to accomplish an item or an action. But I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that each Action Item has one, and only one person responsible to answer for the success or failure of that item!

Failure Mode 4: Allowing the “Tyranny of the Urgent” to overwhelm the execution of the important! This is most often reflected in having little or no effective follow-up or follow-through. I see this most often when the Facilitator or the Team Lead does not hold regular and routine meeting to report status and discuss progress and problems. Remember, people already have plenty to do every day! I find that meeting every two weeks for an hour seems to be ideal for most situations. Meeting every week can become a burden, and every three weeks or more tends to allow things to become forgotten or be overwhelmed in the day-to-day struggle. Also, color-code the status of your Action Items. Blue can represent 100% completed, Green says everything is on-track and on schedule; Yellow indicates behind schedule or you’ve encountered unexpected resistance; and Red indicates a major failure or an inability to implement with current resources or permissions. For your hour-long meeting, only focus on the Reds, then the Yellows if you have time. It is a serious de-motivator for your team members to sit and listen to the Greens and Blues, especially if they do not affect them. Wasting people’s time is not a good way to get them to come to future meetings! Last, do not spend time letting people “explain why it won’t work”. That is a complete waste of everyone’s time! Only allow people to discuss what they are going to do to solve the problem and how they are going to achieve the desired outcome!

These are just a few of the things you can do to significant improve your success in actually implementing major change in your organization. Now go out there and change your world!

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