



Lean Manufacturing

Making Continuous Improvement Work in Your Fabrication Shop

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For the last few years, manufacturers have touted continuous improvement as a top priority and company goal. Case in point: two of the three industrial metal-cutting companies featured *here* in a case study on top performers listed continuous improvement as an imperative operational strategy and best practice that sets their metal-cutting shops above the rest.

However, the truth is while many managers understand the theory of continuous improvement, many are still unsure of how to successfully put it into practice. In fact, *research* has found that the success rate for continuous improvement efforts is less than 60 percent.

What is continuous improvement? Is it simply a set of tools to adopt and implement—or is there more to it than that?

Below is a brief overview of this often over-used, misunderstood term, and some tips for putting it to work in your fabrication shop.

Defining Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement (CI) is defined by *ASQ* as an ongoing effort to improve a product, service, or process. Most companies achieve this by either adopting one of the well-known continuous improvement methods or through the combination of two or more tools.

According to *ASQ*, the most widely used tool for continuous improvement is a four-step quality model—the *plan-do-check-act (PDCA) cycle*, also known as Deming Cycle or Shewhart Cycle. Other widely used tools include *Six Sigma*, *lean manufacturing*, and *Total Quality Management*.

Even so, as an article from *Canadian Metalworking* points out, it's important for managers to remember that continuous improvement is more than just a collection of tools. "Many people mistake the individual tools of continuous improvement for the most important part of the program," the article states. "The tools are just the most visible part that we can see, and subsequently adopt."

Personnel development, the *Canadian Metalworking* article continues, should actually be the central focus of continuous improvement. This means that people—not tools—need to be the primary focus of your CI efforts.

People Before Process

When focusing on personnel development, there are three areas in particular that managers should focus on. As the following explains, teamwork, management, and culture all play critical roles in a successful CI program:

- **Teamwork.** According to the eBook, *Five Performance-Boosting Best Practices for Your Industrial Metal-Cutting Company*, "continuous improvement initiatives need to be a team effort to be sustainable." In other words, to improve your industrial metal-cutting operations to its fullest potential, you need to have the right people with the right skills to keep your plan on course. Without a team backing the process, the very notion of any continuous improvement program is impossible. (You can read more about building an effective CI team [here](#).)
- **Management.** Managing an effective CI team requires a unique set of skills. As another article from *Canadian Metalworking* explains, because CI systems are a set of integrated systems, the management implications also are a set of intertwined values and approaches. "Organizational improvements very rarely take the form of massive, sweeping change," the article explains. "Competent managers seem to have their fingers on all of the smallest details, and effective leaders are often described as "doing all of the little things" that make people feel appreciated, challenged, and engaged." (To learn more about managing a CI team, read the full article [here](#).)
- **Culture.** As any shop manager knows, employee "buy-in" is critical to the success of a shop. An operator who cares about his performance and understands how his job affects the company's overall success is invaluable. The same principle holds true in CI programs, except that everyone needs to buy-in. It needs to be embedded into the company culture. "Building an effective continuous improvement culture is not just about executing a handful of process improvement projects," explains a report from Deloitte. "That's a good place to start—and companies may reap tangible rewards from those projects. But more is required to drive sustainable results over time and embed continuous improvement into the very fabric of the organization. That's when the kind of real, transformational changes take place that can generate hundreds of millions of dollars of opportunities." (For more information, you can download the full Deloitte report [here](#).)

Sustainable Success

In theory, the concept of constantly improving a business sounds good. However, the truth is that many managers don't fully understand what it takes to implement a successful CI program.

To be effective, continuous improvement needs to be about more than just a set of process improvement tools. While a tool may help you achieve short-term improvement, it is the people behind the effort that will help you realize continuous, ongoing improvements. Managers who focus on building a strong team and company culture fully devoted to continuous improvement will see long-term, sustainable results.

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