

IMPROVEMENT PSYCHOLOGY

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Dealing with people while working on improvement projects can be frustrating when good intentions are misunderstood. Psychological factors arise as we set goals, choose team members, choose team leaders, search for creative solutions, deal with delays, get caught up in assigning credit and blame, and as we run into seemingly inevitable resistance to change. This session covers the basics of healthy improvement psychology.

Basics of Healthy Improvement Psychology

Reality

The essence of mental health is reality. Healthy behavior is behavior that is consistent with reality. Because it is consistent with reality, it works. Behavior that is not consistent with reality does not work. When a person concentrates on a small segment of reality it is easy to deal directly and achieve predictable results. A person can get to know that small segment and develop confidence with respect to it and master it. Mastery is the ability to perform effectively and flexibly within some portion of reality.

When we engage in improving work processes we find people who have healthy direct contact with reality with respect to specific tasks. They know what they are doing and perform their tasks with skill. However, processes are made up of many tasks and no one person knows them all.

The farther people get from the tasks that are in their areas of mastery the more superficial their understandings become. This is true within the organization, whether the distance is lateral (another department) or vertical (upper management). And, it is true to an even greater extent when the distance reaches out of the organization to consultants, vendors, learned academicians, etc..

When decisions governing how employees are to behave are made at a distance from reality the results usually reflect that distance. In bureaucracies decisions are routinely made by people who are out of touch with the reality of the work that their decisions impact. Therefore, employees are often required to do things that make little sense. However, if those employees were to make the decisions themselves, each time one of their decisions impacted an area of work other than their own, the same thing would happen. Where processes flow through a number of areas, no one has the detailed, realistic knowledge of all of the tasks. But, someone does have each part of it and that is the key to realistic process improvement.

Arguing as to whether experts and senior managers should improve processes or employees should improve their own work is like arguing over which way to mess up the organization. The experts and senior managers work with **superficial** information. The employees work with **partial** information. The appropriate way to avoid both of these failing is to bring together employees who are masters of the different parts of the process and have them work together to improve the whole process. To do this it is crucial that they be armed with a well-prepared, understandable graphic abstraction of the process.

Abstracting Reality

The key to building an effective graphic abstraction of a process (a process chart) is that we do not attempt to capture all of the knowledge in the process. We keep it simple. We simply list the steps that complete the process. No matter how diligently we might attempt to make an abstraction that would completely match the reality of the process we will never succeed. It is better not to try. The more we work at trying to assemble "all of the data" the more we convince ourselves that our abstraction is the whole story, which it will never be. This leads, in turn, to developing superficial solutions. It is better to prepare a chart that is simply a list of the steps of the process and put this list in front of a group of masters who possess the detailed knowledge. This gives us the combination we need, an overview of the whole process and the detailed knowledge of each part. (And, a chart of this sort can be prepared very quickly. A process with one or two hundred steps can easily be charted in a single day.)

As a team of masters works with a process chart several very constructive things happen. First, because the chart shows them how the different parts of the process fit together, they are able to work with the entire process. This raises them up above the parochial perspective of their individual departments and enables them, as a team, to take on a corporate perspective.

Also, because the chart lists the steps of the process at the task level, it keeps them working realistically on the process. Their discussions are bound to wander off on tangents. Occasionally these tangents prove to be valuable but they must get back to reality and the chart helps them to do this quickly and easily.

And, always the chart is there reminding them of the entire process so that when they get excited about ideas that will work beautifully for part of the process they don't inadvertently begin to overlook those details that will be impacted negatively. In this way the process chart, which is an abstraction based on the same reality that we plan to improve, becomes the vehicle that draws a group of people together into a functioning team, working together on one process

Indicators of Strong Mental Health

As just discussed, the essence of mental health is reality. People who deal well with reality have major advantages in living and tend to exhibit behaviors that reflect the ease with which they accommodate reality. Here is a list of five such behaviors.

Productivity

People with strong mental health get a lot done. This is not compulsive. This person is not driven. Rather, there is a natural outpouring of energy. This is an active person who enjoys life and is good at it, does it well and does a lot of it .

Wide Variety of Interests

People with strong mental health pursue many interests without detracting from their productivity. They gradually discover similarities and connections between activities that are generally considered to be widely disparate. In time this broad understanding takes on a character of wisdom that helps in all that they do.

Flexibility under Stress

People with strong mental health are cool under fire. They have the skill and confidence to get past major frustrations with relative calm. As an example to illustrate this skill, let us consider people in cars coming up to a road that is blocked. A person who knows many roads will know other ways of getting around the obstacle. People who do a lot and enjoy the adventure of life know more ways of doing many things.

Treat People as Individuals

People with strong mental health do not view others stereotypically. They know many people and deal with them appropriately, considering their unique characteristics.

Know One's Limitations and Live Within Them

People with strong mental health live life fully, accomplishing far more than most people. However, they do this while working close to, but within, their limits. Most people do not know their limits because they do not try hard enough to test them. They accept as standards whatever others appear to be doing and feel spent when they have done enough to get by. Healthy people have genuinely experienced their limits in many dimensions.

Applying Healthy Psychology to Improvement Efforts

Setting Up Teams

Choosing Team Members

Not Blue Ribbon Committees - Blue ribbon committees are usually made up of people who do not know the work at first-hand. They operate at a distance from reality and their genius does not make up for this.

Not Just Volunteers - It is important that the masters of the process be on the teams and these people do not have a lot of spare time. Get them to want to be on the project team because it is so important.

Not, "Who Can You Spare?" - More to the point would be, "Who can't you spare?" "Who is the most knowledgeable?" "Whom do the others turn to for help with the most difficult transactions?" "Who would you most like to have represent your area to develop a "best ever" process." "And, whose opinion, built into the process, is most likely to be respected by the others in the work area.?"

Masters - To get the masters onto the team, executives must treat the project as important. Then plan to use the time of the masters sparingly and have the facts well organized so that, when the masters arrive at an improvement meeting they can begin at once to apply their experience to improvement.

Choosing a Team Leader

Management's Choice - If management chooses the team leader, the choice must be endorsed and supported by a manager whose authority is high enough that all of the team members are responsible to that manager. If the team leader is chosen by a manager to whom some of the team members do not report, those people may find the choice difficult to accept.

Team's Choice - If the team chooses their own team leader, they should be expected to accept responsibility for their choice.

Setting Goals

Setting Project Goals

Perfection - Perfection is a negative concept. It focuses attention on the slightest flaw and drags out projects well beyond the time when they are generating reasonable return on investment.

Challenging Goals - Don't be afraid to work toward goals that are well beyond anything that anyone has done before. People are accepting and achieving such goals every day. Non-challenging goals may be used when it is necessary to promise the results but don't let them limit the effort. Always plan to exceed them. Blow them away!

Cost Cutting - If our goals are to improve the organization by cutting staff the costs of alienation are likely to far exceed the benefits achieved in work methods. It is shortsighted to believe that an organization can improve its operations (and in private industry, its competitive stance) by assaulting from within, its most valuable resource. (In private industry this should make the competition very happy unless they are equally shortsighted.)

Herd Mentality - Don't set goals to do what everyone else is doing. Set goals to do what is best for your organization. Many organizations have excused their staff reductions on the grounds that they had to do it because everyone was doing it.

Compromising Goals - The more creatively we work at improvement the less we have to compromise. But, when we compromise on our goals at the very start of a project, we build in a negative self-fulfilling prophecy at the outset, before we even have a chance to discover the possibilities. Accepting a clearly inferior goal for political reasons is one of the failings of the political process that leaves rigid legacies of injustice and restraint of freedom.

Determining Project Scope

Departmental Focus - A departmental focus toward determining project scope tends to keep projects within "Functional Silos", missing huge opportunities to smooth out work flow between departments. It also tends to focus on people as though we intend to study them rather than their work, which is apt to put them on the defensive.

Organizational Chart Focus - The organizational chart is an abstraction that displays how people are grouped and tends to create a political mentality. Using the organizational chart to determine project participation and ownership carries a risk that areas that are impacted by the process, in ways that are not obvious enough to be apparent on the organization chart, will be overlooked and not included.

Process Flow - Determine the items that are to be processed and follow them, letting them tell you where they go. This is an empirical approach to determining project scope. Then choose a start point and an end point. What lies between belongs in the scope. This approach avoids politics and assures professionally objective decisions about participation and scope. Then prepare a process chart as referred to above. (Note, - the process chart is an abstraction that focuses on work flow and is therefore beneficial in directing attention to reality. The organization chart, on the other hand, is an abstraction that focuses on groups of people and therefore tends to direct attention to political relationships.)

Seeking Solutions

Fact Gathering

Treating People With Respect - When gathering facts, the quality of the data obtained will be strongly affected by the way the person who is gathering the facts treats the operating people. If the operating people perceive that they are being treated as though their work is trivial or expendable they are apt to be offended or defensive. The proper way to gather data is to go to the person who is most knowledgeable with respect to the data needed and treat that person appropriately as though he or she is the top authority in the organization.

Authority - If you get caught up in political games, trying to show respect appropriate to people because of their positions, you will invariably find yourself offending people in lower level positions. During data gathering we spend a lot of time with junior people because this is where most of the operating information resides. Respect the authority of reality and the people who have the best handle on that reality. This will assure fresh authenticity in your work and protect you from slipping into bureaucratic politics.

Strategy for Working with the True Masters - When you are working with people for the first time you can't always tell the outstanding ones from those who are conning you. Treat them all as if they are the finest persons you will ever meet. Later when you have more to go on, you will be very glad that you treated some of them with this respect because you now know that they deserve the highest respect. Others, who normally would not seem to merit the respect you chose to give them, will try to measure up to it. They will try harder for you than they will for others who treat them with less respect. And, some will be twits no matter how well you treat them. Give these a second and third chance. Make certain that these people simply will not cooperate before you write them off and get on with the work without them. With this strategy you will find yourself constantly surrounded by people who have reason to cooperate.

Organizing the Facts

Pictures - Pictures provide insight that cannot be provided with words. When a process chart is reviewed by a team of knowledgeable operating people opportunities for improvement seem to leap off the chart.

Work Elements - Break the work down into elements that are the steps people actually perform when they do their work. This enables people to treat the facts with confidence in a craftsman-like manner.

Arranging the Elements - Show how the elements are related to one another. Putting them in sequence is a big help.

Not the Way People are Used to Seeing the Work - Don't worry that the picture is unfamiliar. Looking at the work a little differently, with fresh eyes, improves creativity. The important thing is to be sure that the chart is not so unfamiliar that the team cannot grasp it. If the elements are realistic the team will recognize the parts and be able to understand the chart.

Simplistic Charting - Don't try to simplify by simply not showing detail on the chart. Detail doesn't go away when we ignore it. The trick is to show the detail clearly and then figure out ways that actually make the process simpler.

Dealing With Delays

Finishing the Project

The Moment of Truth - The more time there is left to finish a project, the more relaxed the work is apt to be. As the moment of truth bears down, anxieties rise. Don't yield to them. They are natural. Finish the project on schedule. The process was not perfect when you began. It will not be perfect when you finish. But it can be a whole lot better. Let your recommendations be as good as you can produce in the time available.

Delays - The more a project is delayed:

1. The longer the benefits are postponed.
2. The greater the risk that crucial team members will be lost.
3. The greater the risk that crucial new priorities will force the project to be abandoned.
4. The greater the risk that recommendations will be outdated.
5. The more we lull people (particularly senior management) into expecting perfect results.

Finish Quickly - Nobody expects perfection in a few days. Finish so quickly that the pay-off "knocks their socks off." Many of the most important changes are discovered early in the study.

Procrastination - Procrastination is as common as it is because people often believe they can do the job in a short amount of time. So, they wait until the last minute. If they are right, and they can complete the job in a short amount of time, they should have done it at the beginning and reaped the benefits that much sooner. On the other hand, if they wait until the last minute and then something prevents them from doing the work it is doubly embarrassing when it is revealed that it wasn't even begun.

Preparing the Proposal

Before and After Reconciliation - Use the same tools to define the proposal that you used to define the present process. Comparing like things makes listing the differences easy.

Don't Propose Multiple Alternatives - When management must choose between many options, they are forced to re-do the project. For each recommendation there will usually be several alternative ways to get it done. Propose only the best alternative for each recommendation. If a recommendation is rejected, then run out the alternatives. Assuming you have ten recommendations and you have five alternative ways of accomplishing each of them, your choice is to require management to deal with fifty recommendations or ten.

Management's Zone of Indifference - Management is normally and properly indifferent about most operating detail. The only reason that many recommendations reach management is because they affect work areas beyond the authority of junior people. The key to getting these ideas accepted is to present them in a manner that gives management confidence. This calls for craftsman-like work presented with confidence. (Unfortunately, well-packaged presentations full of mega-claims and testimonials delivered by people touted as experts often capture the confidence of senior management. It is difficult for operating people to match the pizzazz. Don't try. Convince with sincerity and reality instead.)

Control the Seating - Position the team members around the table so that they are interspersed with the managers rather than having the managers on one side and the team members on the other. If this is not attended to, the team members will invariably cluster together and instead of creating an atmosphere of working together we create an atmosphere of junior people trying to convince seniors. This is apt to get the seniors caught up in defending why, in fact, they are senior.

Look Sharp and Sincere - Clean the room. Do anything you can to create an atmosphere of quality. But, most important, present with confidence what you sincerely believe. The best managers are able to see through the dog and pony shows. They are also able to recognize sincere, craftsman-like work.

Installation

Introvert, Extrovert - Research requires and brings out introvert behavior. Installation requires extrovert behavior and if it isn't forthcoming the project will drag on. The window of opportunity will pass and all the good work will come to naught.

Visible Activities - When all of the activities involved in installation are occurring behind the scenes people see no progress and lose interest. Momentum needed for cooperation is lost. Plan visible activities and organize them well to build a ground swell of support and cooperation.

One Person to Coordinate - So many things need to be done during installation that it is futile to expect them to be done without someone keeping track of them and taking action when needed. The key factors here are that the installation have priority with key people and that the coordinator be tenacious.

Credit and Blame

Stealing Credit - Nothing will kill a project faster than the appearance that someone is making a play to grab a disproportionate amount of credit. And, few things will sour a corporate-wide effort more than the appearance that team members are set up to take the blame but that credit will go to executives. Make an effort to place the credit for the specific changes with the people who figured them out and accomplished them. Push the credit down and spread it out and there will be plenty to go around. But, when it is carefully hoarded by a few, there isn't usually much to share anyway!

Resistance to Change

Perception of Resistance - Much resistance to change is perceptual. It works like this. When a person is developing a change and having some success with it, he or she usually gets quite excited about it. As they deal with others whose cooperation they need they rarely come across people who are as excited about it as they are. Picture the person with the idea going 100 miles an hour in the direction of his or her idea and finding the rest of the organization going only 10 miles an hour in that direction. It is easy to perceive this as 90 miles an hour of other people resisting rather than 90 miles an hour of our own exuberance. To get rid of this resistance slow down and share the excitement. It is far better to have a group of people moving together at 30 or 40 miles an hour than to have everyone traveling in a different direction at breakneck speed.