

# 10 best practices for workplace innovation

By Dave Severson

JUST ABOUT ANY WORK BEING DONE today in paper companies - and also in vendor and supplier companies - can be made much easier, simpler, and safer for completion in much less time for little or no financial investment. When applied, the 10 Best Practices (found over a 15-year study) translate immediately and directly to impressive leaps in company performance, customer service, and also employee satisfaction.

Starting with grade changes to build confidence, top-performing companies build work-innovation teams consisting of people from across company functions, disciplines, and the hierarchy. These teams dramatically reduce time and costs on changeovers before rolling-out the good work to operations and maintenance projects, machine and equipment design work, improvement of supplier and vendor delivery times, product innovations, line relocation work, and customer service.

**Best Practice 1.** Focus on rigorous study and improvement of *the Right Work Process within which a problem presents itself*. Do not focus only on solving the apparent problem without best consideration to the work process that is producing the problem.

**Best Practice 2.** Build the Right Team to address improving a problematic company work process with people from across functions, disciplines, and the hierarchy - *including work performers*. Do not follow tradition by assigning the improvement initiative to only one company function such as engineering or operations.

**Best Practice 3.** *Collect qualitative data* about the problematic company work process by systematic observation, videotaping the work process, and interviews with work performers to learn

precisely how the work process is actually completed. Do not rely solely on quantitative data available by measurement, specification review, and statistical analysis or commonly accepted understandings about how the work process should be completed or is designed to be completed.

**Best Practice 4.** Organize collected qualitative and quantitative data about the problematic company work process onto large wall charts to *display precisely how each and every work step is normally and actually completed*. Do not prevent team learning and constrain team achievement by only organizing data into statistical process control (SPC) charts, Six-Sigma formats, or other quantitative reports.

**Best Practice 5.** Set *ambitious* targets to achieve for the urgently needed new work-process time. Do not follow conventional approaches to target setting that constrain innovation to meet goals considered to be "realistic" or "achievable" or "reasonable".

**Best Practice 6.** *Search relentlessly* for innovations that produce easy, simple, and safe new work-process procedures that can be completed in much less time for little or no financial investment. Do not accept work-process innovations that are complex and driven by costly higher technologies until all alternative ideas have been exhausted.

**Best Practice 7.** *Determine the new work-process procedure* to be implemented by testing innovations against criteria that produce an easier, simpler and safer new work-process procedure that can be completed in much less time for little or no financial investment. Do not accept even the most attractive work innovations that require larger financial investments simply because the investments can be easily justified.

**Best Practice 8.** Support work-improvement team leadership by a *lead coordinator* charged with being "in service" to help the improvement team learn and conduct its work excellently toward quick implementation of impressive innovations. Do not follow a traditional team leadership model where the team is "managed" in a traditional sense toward achievement of needed results.

**Best Practice 9.** *Immediately implement* as many innovations as possible while testing and running trials on remaining innovations that appear to hold high promise for success. Do not wait to implement work process innovations until they are developed to a point that they may be "enterprise solutions" that can be rolled-out for company-wide application.

**Best Practice 10.** *Support forums among lead coordinators* of work-innovation teams where results are shared and celebrated, exciting innovations are demonstrated, special challenges in common are addressed, team learning is encouraged, and coordinators can ask each other for help to ensure greater success. Do not rely only on conventional means for monitoring progress or controlling teamwork such as management reports or presentations to management from lead coordinators.

To transform the 10 Best Practices into usable tools for your improvement teams to use, adapt current models for conducting work improvement into step-by-step, procedural approaches that follow precisely the very same order of practices as presented above.

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