

# 6 Keys to Fail-Proofing Your Continuous Improvement Initiatives

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## Key Takeaways:

- Investments in continuous improvement training often fail to produce meaningful sustainable change because CI knowledge, tactics, and tools make up only a small part of continuous improvement success.
- Organizational-wide behavioral change and ownership in CI initiatives is essential to implementing and sustaining changes that drive measurable performance improvements.
- A hands-on, on-the-job approach to continuous improvement that addresses learning, implementation, and behavioral change all at the same time and at all levels of the organization is the best way to ensure a return on investments in continuous improvement.

## Change doesn't happen in the classroom. It happens on the shopfloor.

If your firm has invested considerable sums in continuous improvement seminars, training, and certifications, but has yet to see real results in your business, you're not alone. While the learnings undeniably have value, especially for the individual participants involved, translating lessons and strategies into meaningful, sustainable change for your business rarely occurs. Why? Usually, because trainees lack the authority, time, resources, and/or know-how to drive the organization-wide behavioral change, buy-in, and ownership needed to make continuous improvement happen.

## Expertise and tools are only 30% of the CI equation.

You may have multiple leaders who have aced the courses, earned the belts, and internalized all the CI best practices. But no matter how extensive their new knowledge and capabilities may be, this represents only a fraction of what it takes to make continuous improvement a reality in your business.

Behavior change and ownership at all management levels of the organization are the far larger contributors to CI success, as well as the far heavier lifts to achieve. Since few organizations can send every member of the company to the same continuous improvement seminar at the same time, it's almost a given that the handful of attendees are going to run into resistance and roadblocks from other team members when they come back eager to implement change. Ultimately, your CI champions become demotivated. And the status quo remains the status quo.



## An on-the-job approach to continuous improvement drives behavior change and ownership from day one.

While organizations can't take everyone to CI training, they can bring the training to the entire team. The beauty of such an approach is multi-fold: everyone gets to participate. And learning and implementation happen at the same time. People at all managerial levels are directly engaged in facilitating change, and the results reinforce commitment. Thus, the hard work of behavior change and instilling ownership happens naturally. And the payoff is virtually guaranteed.

### Here are the essential components of a successful continuous improvement effort:

#### 1 Don't just learn it. Do it.

It's one thing to learn about the benefits of continuous improvement in a theoretical setting or to have your supervisor recite the advantages to you. It's entirely another to see it in action in your own business and on your own shop floor.

Making continuous improvement learning a hands-on activity with every employee engaged in the process in parallel empowers the entire team to understand and internalize the "why" and "what's in it for me" behind the effort. This becomes the foundation for sustainable behavior change and fosters a culture of innovation, ownership, and accountability at all levels of the organization.

#### 2 Secure a top-down commitment.

All levels of leadership need to play a crucial role in driving behavioral change and ensuring the success of continuous improvement efforts. And it must start at the very top with the c-suite demonstrating a strong commitment to the desired behaviors through consistency in words and actions. When leaders practice what they preach and act as role models, it sets the tone and expectation for the rest of the organization while building trust and credibility.

Even when change gets off to a great start at other levels of the organization, if the CEO is not just as actively on-board and engaged as the supervisors on the floor, the momentum won't last. This top-level commitment is so critical that TBM consultants have considered pulling out of otherwise successful engagements where the CEO was not on board.

#### 3 Take a bottom-up approach.

While support and commitment need to come from the top, the heart of the continuous improvement effort is driven by the shop floor. CI focuses on optimizing processes and involves analyzing workflows, identifying bottlenecks, and implementing changes to streamline operations. All levels need to be involved in these process mapping activities; participation, input, feedback, and suggestions must come from managers, supervisors, and line workers alike.

To ensure every employee has the chance to contribute, conducting critiques and feedback sessions is best done in hierarchical cohorts where employees at different levels have the chance to speak freely without their bosses in the room. In all conversations, set the tone that the aim is overall process improvement, and not blaming individuals. This approach is key to nurturing behavior change as all employees realize their opportunity to influence and improve the work they do and the company's performance and outcomes.

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## Set clear expectations and track and manage your numbers.

The ultimate goal of any continuous improvement effort is to improve the numbers, be they productivity, on-time delivery, safety, or other key performance indicators for your organization. Because you can't improve what you don't measure, good data will be key to tracking progress and making the results visible to all.

Start by setting and communicating clear improvement targets and making them meaningful to individuals at all levels. In other words, set targets that an individual can actually influence, such as the number of tires installed versus the total number of cars produced. Tracking actual versus planned performance in as close-to-real-time as possible is important, but it doesn't have to require a fancy system. You can use a whiteboard where numbers are manually recorded every hour. The key is to make it visible to everyone to drive ownership and accountability.

However you track it, reviewing and analyzing the data with each shift is an important part of driving behavior change. Address hits and misses, again not to assign blame, but instead to better identify areas of inefficiency and waste and to encourage and engage people in pinpointing root causes of variances and finding potential solutions. Your data should drive decision-making. Involving everyone in the analysis creates a problem-solving culture that is fundamental to sustaining continuous improvement long-term.

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## Keep the focus on small, incremental changes.

Manageable changes as opposed to large-scale transformations are an important hallmark of a continuous improvement culture. Keeping targets realistic and building on successes over time reduces risk and allows for quicker implementations and evaluations.

Smaller scale changes also promote flexibility and allow companies to course correct as needed, encouraging employees to learn from both successes and failures. Always keep the channels for two-way communication and feedback open to create a platform for employees to more confidently share ideas, concerns, and suggestions at each step of the continuous improvement journey.

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## Give it time.

Achieving the behavioral change that drives continuous improvement isn't going to happen overnight. It is a gradual process that requires patience, persistence, and ongoing commitment, but it will consistently evolve as employees are actively engaged in the improvement process and see the results. Continuous reinforcement from leaders and celebrating successes and milestones will keep the momentum going while ensuring the sustainability of change.

While an on-the-job approach to continuous improvement is going to create buy-in and ownership much more successfully than offsite training for a select few, you will undoubtedly still have some holdouts who are not initially receptive to change. Proactively address resistance and barriers with strategies that include training and development, performance management, providing additional support and resources where needed, and addressing fears and concerns head-on. As with all things CI, be open to feedback and willing to make adjustments to make your implementation plan work for your business.



## Bring the expertise to you.

Continuous improvement is an ongoing journey that works best when treated like a puzzle where you address all the pieces at the same time. This means it should happen internally, engage everyone, and focus on learning, implementation, and behavior change simultaneously.

But bringing CI in-house doesn't mean you have to go it alone. Partners who specialize in change management and implementation and who are willing to work hands-on, shoulder-to-shoulder with your people from the shop floor to the top floor can be instrumental in imparting knowledge in CI tools and tactics. These specialists can go beyond traditional consulting work to act as an extension of your operations team, driving the behavioral change, commitment, and collaboration critical to your success. The right partners can also bring an outside perspective to help keep progress on track, effectively address resistance, and ensure ROI.

Ultimately change management partners can position your team to sustain changes and keep building on your successes to create long-term competitive advantage—exactly what continuous improvement is all about.

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## Meet the Expert



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