



Imitation Destroys Quality and Improvement– The Future is Innovation

Did Toyota create their legendary improvement system by beginning with a House of Lean and a toolbox? No. Mr. Toyoda began with a problem and solved it, the birth of Jidoka. Toyota began with problems and innovated solutions. When Motorola created the Six Sigma methodology, were any of the tools new? No. Tools are useful when employed to solve a problem, but often not as useful when done to imitate the success of others.

Long-term sustainable advantage simply comes down to ***Innovation versus Imitation***.

Imitators sometimes visit world-class companies and copy their artifacts, systems, and processes. Innovative companies teach others their systems and processes and display their artifacts without fear because they know they will always be ahead of the imitators. To achieve sustainable improvement, imitation must stop. In the future, successful companies will need to continuously increase internal capability by innovating their own solutions and systems.

Innovation does not mean invention. To invent means to ***produce or contrive something previously unknown by the use of ingenuity or imagination***. To innovate means to ***begin or introduce something new for, or as if for, the first time***. Companies do not need to expend energy unnecessarily inventing, but autonomously innovating solutions.

Any continuous improvement paradigm requires people engagement, adaptability, and extensive coaching and mentoring. Sustainable success depends on these things. When the ideal state is pursued a company can adapt to changing world conditions and the cultural mindset becomes leader independent. The way to achieve sustainable advantage is to develop and implement systems that ingrain the improvement mindset in the culture. This creates the internal capability to respond to change regardless of magnitude or frequency and develop innovative solutions that keep the company ahead of its competition.

In a world where the more adaptable and innovative company usually comes out on top and stands the test of time there is no viable cookie-cutter solution. Imitating rarely creates long-term buy in and often leads to cardboard cutouts of systems and processes that fall over as soon as the implementers walk away.

The following is a roadmap for fostering innovation, achieving sustainable success, and long-term advantage regardless of business type or industry, whether manufacturing or service.

- 1) **Organizational Alignment** - Always begin any initiative, program, organizational change, or other major activity with alignment. Alignment means everyone understands the vision, mission, strategies and if they are winning or losing in pursuit of the vision. Just like any team sport, people acting together as a team is an incredible force that even a group of extraordinary individuals acting individually would not be able to defeat. Everyone has their individual role to play, but all activities must be completely aligned with the company's direction. One person acting on their own can destroy team efforts. For fairness and to make the organization stronger, a simple way of determining who is not a team player is a necessary part of attaining organizational alignment. In order to attract and retain the right people, there must be a simple process for eliminating the wrong people.
- 2) **Routines** and standardized ways of doing work allows for seeing good from bad and standardizing improvements. All work processes can and should be standardized, from operating equipment to one-on-one performance reviews. Without standards chaos reigns, variation is high, and improvement is fleeting.
- 3) **Reaction Protocols** - The next step is to make certain everyone knows what behavior is expected when unacceptable conditions occur. Teams in every area of the business should define high-frequency escalation processes and reaction protocols and live by them. The reaction protocols must include recognition processes that reward the right behavior. The discipline to stand by processes and not fall back into the trap of rewarding firefighting takes constant effort.

- 4) **Problem Solving** - Team problem solving is crucial to long-term success. As problems arise and the competitive landscape changes, a workforce of scientific problem solvers allows a business to adapt. A standardized problem-solving methodology (e.g. 8D) must be one of the key strategies in every business. Identifying and eliminating root causes of problems requires full commitment in every organizational area. All levels of leadership serve as the coaches and primary mentors of problem solving. Standardized high-frequency reviews for effectiveness is the best way to ensure not only that the methodology is followed and that leadership cares about problem solving, but it is also a coaching opportunity. One proven way to get an organization into the problem-solving mindset is to latch onto a specific area of challenge (e.g. Quality, Safety, Customer Complaints, etc) and demand that every special-cause event initiates the standard methodology.
- 5) **Ideas** - In order to fully engage employees, their ideas should be expected, solicited, and implemented. To make certain that a culture of chaos is not fostered, though, a system to harness ideas, translate them into action, and verify improvement is required. Follow up by successive lines of leadership ensures ideas are taken seriously, acted on, and feedback given timely. Idea generation and implementation cannot be something done in addition to the “real” job, it has to be the primary job when not following routines.
- 6) **Learning Organization** - Organizations are duty bound to be committed to learning, all types of learning both individually and organizationally. The learning that occurs when problems are solved and ideas implemented needs to be harnessed, communicated, and applied proactively. An organization-wide system to apply lessons learned helps reduce risk. Lessons learned are fantastic, but lessons applied are what make the difference.
- 7) **Retrospective and Adaptive** - The last thing to do is to ensure there are periodic checks on how things are going in order to keep and expand what works and rethink and act on what does not.

In his book Leading Change, Kotter wrote of organizational change, “Declaring victory too soon is like stumbling into a sinkhole...” When it comes to quality and improvement, organizations can NEVER DECLARE VICTORY; the job is never finished and the journey never ends. If success in continuous improvement is measured by what is implemented (Lean, 5S, Six Sigma, TQM, etc) the company is destined to be an imitator; the only real victory in continuous improvement is sustained organizational adaptability and success.

Sometimes it may feel as if teams are reinventing the wheel, but teams innovating solutions to their problems is exactly what is necessary to build internal organizational capability and create employees that can think scientifically and adapt to new challenges.

Key Takeaways

- 1) Imitation does not offer sustainable results
- 2) Innovate solutions to build internal organizational capability
- 3) Never declare victory
- 4) CI success is measured by how well the 7 roadmap elements are practiced