



Enabling Continuous Improvement

“... if the workforce were guaranteed that any improvements they made would not lead to redundancies, most British firms, at least, could probably become between 25% and 50% more effective without spending any money.” Joynson and Forrester + Keith Grint

And therein lies the rub. Most managers will agree that continuous improvement, which used to be required for improving productivity, is now essential for just survival. But the same 'most managers' are also concerned with the need for control – and there is often a contradiction between the two needs. So a key question is about how to unlock the contradiction, and ensure that continuous improvement is aligned with strategic direction. First, consider some of the challenges to much conventional thinking.

The Designed Organisation

Organisation design mainly concerns strategy, structure and process. The idea is to provide direction; distribute power and tasks. The aim is to achieve stability, predictability and repeatability - all designed to ensure delivery of the strategy. The problem is that when it is realised that the business environment is very challenging, we demand that people innovate to improve performance – continuously. The implication is that people are being asked to produce instability, unpredictability and un-repeatability in an organisation designed to produce the exact opposite. And when they fail to deliver the required continuous improvement, complaints are uttered about their lack of engagement with a priority business need!

Command and control management styles

Telling people what to do and then checking up often, (often accompanied by lots of KPIs), is a well worn but still popular approach to managing – and control. The evidence suggests that it has never been successful in delivering high performance but its application to continuous improvement is a logical non-runner. There are two dimensions to continuous improvement. The first is about identifying a performance problem and analysing for cause. The second is about thinking of a new way of doing something, and transforming the new idea into action – someone has to do something original.

The first cannot be commanded, as it requires an act of discovery, reflection, interpretation and analysis. This most often arises when two or more people come together, commonly ignoring formal structures, processes and boundaries, to share their knowledge and ideas in pursuit of some sort of performance improvement. The second is a matter of organisational climate – is it safe to try to new ways of working, knowing that all such ventures are, by definition, risky? What will happen if an idea is tried and fails? Will it be shared learning – or retribution! If it is the latter, say goodbye to continuous improvement.

Organisational permissions

Exhortation does little to change behaviour. By contrast, permissions are the implicit messages contained in the design of organisation structures and processes, (as suggested above), and in the acts of individual managers, especially the senior variety. For example, an excess focus on short term numbers, or too many management interventions in operational issues and decisions, are both sure-fire killers of continuous improvement. The approach that works is for managers to seek negative, constraining permissions and replace them with positive, enabling permissions – specifically those that make it OK to test new ways of working, in the knowledge that what would follow failure would be shared learning, not retribution.

All of which leads to the conclusion that continuous improvement can be enabled, but not managed. So, the challenge is how to develop an continuous improvement-enabling organisation. Fortunately, the challenge also contains the solution.

“... the solutions to most organisational problems are already known to the workers – but their bosses prevent them from implementing them.” Joynson and Forrester + Keith Grint

Enabling continuous improvement and control

The clue is in how people from different parts of the organisation come together to resolve problems or capitalise on opportunities. They share their knowledge, create new solutions and, in doing so, create new knowledge. The outcomes of such networks of agents coming together are not predictable, and not controllable. There are, however, natural control mechanisms that apply to all such self-organising groups. These are natural survival, experiential learning and limited ability to dispose of large resources.

Since the conditions required to enable continuous improvement are well known, the trick is to provide groups of people with information on which of those conditions currently exist and which do not – and then provide them with a safe opportunity to agree and implement actions that will move the organisation closer to the desired state. Since these actions will, in themselves, be innovative, the continuous improvement cycle starts there are then. The process drives towards a new form of emergent order, that, in turn, enables ongoing continuous improvement.

Magus Networker

Creating the conditions for continuous improvement is one of the key goals that Magus Networker was designed to achieve. Stimulating and enabling continuous improvement that is coherent and self-organising is another. Creating developmental actions that do not encounter resistance is a fundamental characteristic of all Networker applications.

Conventionally, Magus Networker is custom-configured for each problem resolution / organisational development application. Now the developers of Magus Networker have designed an application specifically targeting the issue of developing an enabling continuous improvement. This is in the form of a template that can, however, still be adapted to the specific needs of each organisation. The Magus Networker process uses front-end analysis to enable this adaptation, and the design of the group.

The design of the 'enabling continuous improvement' application uses extensive research into the creation of conditions that enable continuous improvement. It deals with both systemic and cultural drivers of emergent order, with the question set focused very specifically on continuous improvement.

As with all Magus Networker applications, the information generated is self-validating – it is beyond challenge. Faced with a 'real-world' description of the current state, people develop insights that identify hidden heroes; locate gaps in information and communication networks; action blockages to continuous improvement. As organisational constraints on continuous improvement are identified by a process of cross-functional review, the conditions needed for innovative problem resolution are automatically in place.

Magus Networker is part of a complete methodology for resolving organisational problems and developing greater performance. It handles complex data sets with ease, providing powerful insights into the nature of the problem, and its causes. It does this through graphical reports presented as network charts, that illuminate all the complex working relationships, formal and informal, that actually drive organisational performance. The Magus Networker process enables many people to be engaged, through open dialogue, with their attention focused on the issues, causes and actions illuminated through the network charts.

As with all Magus Networker applications, the process is fast, requiring weeks, not months. Developmental action flows automatically from the analyses for cause. These actions include those taken by delegates to the Magus Networker workshops, and by the people in management roles who sponsored the process. By default, priorities are determined according to the goals agreed at the start of the process.

