

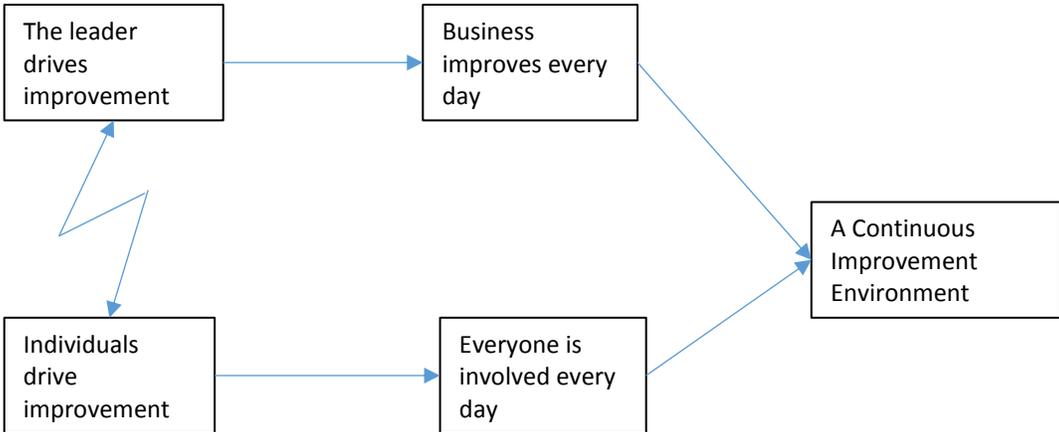
Leading in a Continuous Improvement Environment

What's a Leader to Do?

If we seriously strive to match the success of companies like Toyota, GE, Allied Signal, Wiremold, and many others who are known leaders in continuous improvement, we must have strong, steady leadership. These companies are known for their leaders as figureheads and as no nonsense individuals. We are inclined to believe that we must match their styles in demanding measurable improvement and tough love when the improvement falls short of plan.

On the other hand, we are taught that in this day and age, we must empower our employees. They need to be connected to the mission and engaged in making the company better. Particularly the younger generations are known to be sensitive to a desire to contribute to something larger than themselves.

We are stuck with a conflict:



Business leaders tend to believe that in order to assure that the business improves every day, they need to drive the improvement. However, at the same time, everyone needs to be involved, and so we expect that individuals must drive the improvement. There is a false assumption in these premises.

I believe that leaders don't "do improvement". The effective improvements are those that the individuals who do the work identify and implement and adjust over time to match the evolving needs of the team and organization. Leaders set the stage for improvement by



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helping the individuals to recognize the situations when improvement is needed, by removing obstacles to making improvements, particularly when the obstacles are based in policy or hierarchy, and by celebrating the successes. In order to enable this work on the part of the individuals and teams in the organization, the leader needs to assure the individuals and team have the skills they need and make the time available for people to practice.

It Takes Courage

Many leaders rise to their position through the ranks, either in their current organization or another. They have great experiences to leverage in understanding what the current staff are handling. Unfortunately, we often believe that our unique experiences have universal application. The leader has to be willing to keep their ideas and experiences to themselves and allow the staff to come up with their own understanding and solution. The leader must allow the staff to succeed or fail, so long as the failure is not catastrophic, on their own. A solution that proves not to work is an incredible learning experience. A solution handed to the staff that ends up working or not working provides no learning at all. It simply results in dependence on the leader or on the expert that developed it, and thoroughly disempowers the employees.

The leader expresses interest in what the individuals and team are attempting to do. The leader asks questions to clarify the understanding and the intent. The leader asks why the team and individuals have selected this particular problem or course of action and what other options have been considered. The leader clarifies for the team what the organization wants to achieve and assures alignment between those goals and the efforts of the team. The leader works hard to say “yes” to requests, to ask what was learned, and to ask what the next step will be.

In the famous words of the *Tao Te Ching* “...The Master doesn’t talk, he acts. When his work is done, the people say, “Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves!”

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