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BELOW THE RADAR

Factors that Steal Tons, Increase Costs and Prevent Change

Practice, Practice, Practice

I remember when I decided to take up golf. I was living in Craig, Colorado and worked at the Empire Coal Mine. I spent hours practicing my swing – at home, during lunch, after work and on the weekends – before I attempted to play my first round. I knew that I would only enjoy the game when my golf swing felt natural and I did not have to think about the position of the club during my back swing and follow-through on each shot. I also did not want to embarrass myself when playing with the mine management team on Friday afternoons.

We know that practice is critical to the performance of any sports team. A team practices many times before the season starts to ensure that the team knows the plays and how to execute them before they play against opponents. Players and coaches come to practice because they know that **the opportunity to make mistakes when they don't count will maximize the chance to win when they do count.**

There is also a place for practice in process improvement work, especially in the execution of new or revised processes. Expanding the implementation timeline to include time for practice is comparable to including a ramp-up period for new equipment installations. Engineers often set expectations for slower production rates during ramp-ups or the start-up of new operations to account for "surprises" or "tweaking" process control parameters before full production levels can be achieved. Practicing new behaviors and processes are just as important to the success and sustainability of improvement.

When processes change, **participants must abandon their ability to go on autopilot.** Employees with years of experience suddenly feel like new employees: uncomfortable, unsure and afraid to make a mistake. How long should this practice period be? The answer depends partly on the frequency of the new work practice. We have heard for many years that it takes over 30 days to permanently adopt a new daily habit. If a new procedure is only executed monthly, several months could be required for the participants to become efficient and choose to stay with it. This is especially true when changes in language are part of the deliverables.

When a company recognizes the value of practicing new ways of communicating and sharing ideas, it is willing to extend the timeline and integrate "practice" time into the implementation schedule. Advantages of building a practice period into an implementation plan include the following:

- The uncomfortable learning curve is shortened.
- It is easier for everyone to form new work habits, become accustomed to new communication styles and develop a level of confidence that makes them choose "the new way of working" over the old.
- Making mistakes become part of the official learning process. It is easier for managers and employees to examine their own performance and talk about what they could have done better.
- When employees can discuss mistakes as comfortably as they talk about improved performance, the chance of sustaining a new work practice or process goes up exponentially.

Improvement is all about doing things differently to achieve a desired result. If a company wants a culture that is always focused on getting better, management must behave as if "getting better" is one of the most important things to work on every day. After process changes are implemented, every workday can be thought of as "practice" as people build their improvement skills and form new habits and behaviors. Employees need encouragement and reassurance to stay focused on new work practices, especially when progress is slower than expected. Some days it will be easier for them to "skip practice". **Once employees stop practicing, improvements die and change stops.** Managers are the source of energy that sustains "practice" and improvement gains month after month and year after year.

Here's the thought for October/November:

Managers are like coaches. They are the greatest influence in encouraging and sustaining practice during process improvement work.

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