

# ***The People Side Of Improvement*** **Success Factors for Sustainable Change**

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## **Improvement Success Hinges on What We Fix, Measure and Talk About**

In August, I spoke at a SME (Society of Mining Engineers) technical conference. My topic addressed consistent plant performance when “running” and during shut downs and start-ups. I opened the session with a story about “Dave”:

QRS Company has a training program for control room operators. Dave has only worked in the control room a few weeks. He was trained on SOPs for safe start-up/shut-down procedures and operating the control panel. Dave has been asked to focus on speed of the process as his key measure. He has been trained by John and Andy, senior operators who both have years of experience and have been through many unplanned events that stopped production or impacted quality. Dave noticed that each man has his own procedures for recovering from an event in the plant. Dave has recognized an opportunity to change the sequence of steps in the shutdown procedure that John taught him. He believes that this change will shorten the procedure for problem correction. He wants to get the plant back into production more quickly to help the operation and make him look good as a new employee.

What was wrong with this scenario?

1. Operator training was focused primarily on procedures for “running” and did not address consistent start-up and shutdown procedures.
2. Operators were given the impression during training that they were free to modify procedures for startup and shutdown.
3. QRS management created the potential for a very costly event. What if Dave’s procedure caused equipment damage and additional lost production?
4. Emphasizing consistent procedures from shift to shift and operator to operator was a form of “free” process control that is often missed as an improvement opportunity. To capture it, management must accept responsibility for holding people accountable.

The rest of the session addressed options for building and implementing “Control and Response Plans” for this very purpose. After my 20-minute session, I asked if there were any questions. There were no questions, so I sat down. Then something very interesting happened. The man sitting behind me whispered in my ear “You were exactly right about what you told us, but I did not want to embarrass anyone here by talking so that everyone could hear me.” In other words, he knew that plant managers were at fault for allowing operators to choose their own procedures, and that the managers in attendance could be embarrassed to acknowledge this as an opportunity for improvement when they could have taken more responsibility for the training approach in the past. Instead, he chose to say nothing.

My name is Kay Sever. I am a sustainable improvement coach and consultant and a certified management consultant (CMC) that specializes in helping companies find and capture lost opportunities to improve operational, financial and organizational performance. As part of that work, I help clients remove the barriers that get in the way of their success, including talking about what really needs to be fixed. NAQN has asked me to write a monthly column to raise awareness about lost opportunity and the barriers that prevent change.

I have met with hundreds of mining and plant people from every organizational level during my career. Our work included a lengthy list of activities involved in improving operating, financial and organizational performance: identifying/valuing improvement opportunities, capturing customer requirements (internal/external), setting process optimums and process control limits, collecting/analyzing data, selecting key measures, reviewing trend charts, managing planned equipment delays, mapping processes, removing organizational silos, facilitating process

improvement teams, implementing action plans for improvement, helping managers “lead and manage” improvement, and communicating to solve problems and capture opportunities. Without exception, **organizational barriers impacted the implementation of these tasks.** People create most of these barriers (often unintentionally) and their costs are real (lost production, lost time, poor quality, dollars spent that could have been saved, high frustration levels that cause people to leave, etc.). People can remove them if they know how to recognize them and what action to take.

I look forward to sharing my perspectives about achieving sustainable improvement in the coming months. We may not always agree, but that’s OK. Each month I will leave you with a thought about what I call the “people side of improvement”. Here’s the thought for November:

Lasting improvement depends on changing what we fix, measure and talk about.

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Kay Sever, CMC, CQIA implements improvement programs and management development programs for mines, plants and service organizations. Her approach balances commonly used tools and methods with a focus on value creation and the “people side of improvement”. Kay works with every organizational level and department to find the highest dollar opportunities and remove barriers that prevent sustainable change. She helps management teams lead improvement and better execute the budget, capital approvals, incentive plans, communications, etc. See [MiningOpportunity.com](http://MiningOpportunity.com) for details on her services and contact information. Look for the mining edition of her first book “Building An Opportunity Culture – Addressing the Barriers That Steal Profits and Prevent Sustainable Change”, available on her website under Products/Books.