

# Reflecting on 250 improvement activities



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I recently surpassed a career benchmark by facilitating my 250th improvement activity. That's a lot of improvement.

As I was reviewing the database that I use to track these activities, several pleasant memories came flooding back as I recalled the people, the excitement and yes, the occasional struggles as teams dealt with various technical challenges and change in general.

While I'm pleased with the high percentage of sustained successes, there were some activities where the hoped-for benefits were not realized, or worse, not sustained. These provide lessons: How can I improve my event planning and facilitation techniques and, most importantly, learn to better guide leaders to understand their critical role following improvement events?

But 250 is cause for celebration. So here's a rundown of some of my favorite improvement events:

- By taking a close look at how they completed concrete patching projects, the streets department in the City of Fort Dodge noticed that they tended to assign crews for the entire project based on the peak demand step.

This resulted in excess workers during other process steps. They decided to try working multiple projects in parallel and assigning workers for the process step rather than for the entire project. The result was a four-fold increase in the amount of patching completed, allowing the city to eliminate subcontracting of small patching jobs and saving tens of thousands of dollars per year.

- Environmental Services workers at Mary Greeley Medical Center created standard work to define the known best sequence for cleaning an inpatient room following discharge. Variation in cleaning quality and productivity was dramatically reduced.

Perhaps most exciting, roughly 50 employee improvement suggestions were implemented to the standard during the next two years resulting in a continuously improving process.

- Fairfield Line Inc. officials knew their two buildings contained too much "stuff." Two days were spent disposing of obsolete inventory and supplies, hoping to simply make room for future 5S events.

After just two days the management team began to question, "I wonder if we really need two buildings?" Today it comfortably runs its operation in one building with room to spare.

- Experts from across Iowa challenged 4-H's decades-old paradigm of purchasing project booklets from National 4-H. They identified that their customers (youth members and their families) preferred online learning to books, and that families expected free, instant access to information that didn't require a trip to town during regular office hours.

The team designed a new process built around Internet access to project materials. The new process saves ISU 4-H and member families tens of thousands of dollars annually and has become a national 4-H benchmark.

- PowerFilm Solar combined 10 disparate process steps for its foldable product line that were randomly located throughout their factory into a single one-piece flow cell. What typically had taken several days to complete could be routinely completed by a single operator in less than five minutes.

The success prompted PowerFilm to implement cells across all of its product lines.

- Five departments from Danfoss Power Solutions worked together to make a step function improvement in 5S (housekeeping and organization) in the Engineering Garage.

Because the facility is used to work on hydraulic systems on off-highway vehicles, the work can be dirty and oily.

With five teams sharing the area, there was ample opportunity for finger pointing. Due to the aligned efforts of the five supervisors, the garage became a 5S benchmark for me and for Danfoss.

- Fairfield Line Inc. officials weren't pleased with its on-time delivery performance on custom screen printing and embroidery. They dove into the details of their order fulfillment process, documenting every step in the process, identifying waste and sources of defects.

Then they defined a new process which resulted in each and every order being visually posted as it made its way through the system. No more "lost" orders hidden in in-baskets or computer software. The result dramatically improved on-time delivery and allowed them to put some teeth behind their strategy to "compete with speed."

Space limitations force me to stop. My initial paring produced four times as many candidates. What's noteworthy from these seven is that they cover municipal government, health care, education/extension, manufacturing and office/engineering. Waste identification and elimination are universal concepts.

### RICK SAYS

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