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Continuous improvement challenges swimmers and business people

This past summer, I was enjoying a lap swim over lunch at the local aquatics center when the swimmer in the neighboring lane tapped me on the shoulder.

“Can I offer you some advice?” he asked. (It’s never good when a complete stranger starts a conversation like this.) “You’re working way too hard.”

He went on to critique my stroke and offered several helpful suggestions. Then he closed with the killer: “You look like you’re drowning.”

Ouch! I wanted to advise him he should never work in a job where providing advice tactfully was crucial to success. On the other hand, it may explain why the lifeguards always appeared to be on edge whenever I swam.

Nonetheless, I readily accepted his advice. Feedback when swimming is only a lane away and watching neighboring swimmers leaving me in their wake for as long as I could remember had left me to ponder the potential that I was doing something wrong.

This experience caused me to think about the challenges that face many organizations wanting to improve.

The first challenge is making the performance gap obvious to employees. As someone who works with organizations to help them identify



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and remove the waste in processes, a typical initial reaction often heard from employees is, “We’ve been cutting resources for the past 15 years. We’re already lean!” The goal is to translate this response into its more accurate corollary: “I can’t imagine getting our jobs done with fewer resources using our current lousy methods. I guess we better find a way to improve our processes because competitive pressures are not likely to subside anytime soon.”

Unless your business is located on a major thoroughfare or in a mall with several competitors nearby (e.g., a gas station or restaurant), it may seem like you’re swimming in a one-lane pool. Direct feedback as to how you’re doing relative to others will be difficult. Thus, it becomes critical to

establish clear, meaningful and objective metrics with goals to measure progress. Industry associations or external experts can be helpful in providing reasonable targets for improvement.

Even with hard evidence, there’s a natural tendency to rationalize away the performance gap:

- The other swimmers are younger; they should be in better shape.
- The other swimmers are older; they’re retired and get to swim every day.
- The other swimmers are right-handed ...

Likewise, a typical reaction from employees, even when faced with compelling evidence of the performance gap and case studies for proven techniques is that it won’t work within their organization because “we’re different.”

Experience with organizations, both public and private, from a wide range of industries has resulted in my Two Laws of Organizational Diversity:

- Rule No. 1: Every organization is unique.
- Rule No. 2: No organization is as unique as it thinks.

Therefore, have the courage to utilize proven improvement tools even if the case studies are not from your industry. Modify their use as appropriate to fit your organization’s needs.

Finally, understand that change, even for the better, is a long, slow process with few shortcuts. In the case of my swimming, I’m in the process of undoing more than 40 years of bad habits. It feels awkward, certainly harder than my old method. But, hopefully, I’ll eventually find and feel comfortable with a more efficient stroke.

Changing habits and mind-sets in an organization is many times more difficult than changing a swimming stroke. The challenge increases dramatically as the size and age of the organization increases. But there is no greater reward for a leader than seeing improvement successfully occur.

Rick Brimeyer is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development.

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