Sustaining the gains and moving forward

RICK BRIMEYER

Brimeyer LLC

He is president of the Ames, Iowa, consulting firm

Standard Work is widely recognized as an important tool for establishing a healthy continuous improvement culture.

Many benefits exist for those organizations that excel at visually documenting the best sequence of steps for performing a given task, harvested from the expertise of those who regularly perform that task:

• Performance increases as everyone uses the known best process.

• The experience gap between task experts and novices narrows, resulting in more confident employees.

• A training document of the known best process exists for new employees.

• Problems associated with the process are fewer and easier to solve due to less variation.

• A known benchmark exists against which future improvement ideas can be compared.

Your team has gone through the painstaking, detailed work of pulling together experts, comparing the various steps and "tricks" each has incorporated through the years, analyzing, negotiating (and maybe even arguing), before finally agreeing on a known best sequence of steps that all appear willing to support.

A skilled support person has taken that knowledge and distilled it into a clear, concise and visual document (or even a movie). All employees who perform the task have been trained on the new standard and have demonstrated that they can perform it.

You welcomed future ideas to improve the standard, emphasizing that this is simply today's known best practice. Some comments — both positive and negative — were uttered during the training but everyone at least nodded when asked if they understood the need for a standard.

What now: Celebrate with a glass of wine and move on to the next challenge? Not quite.

The time period immediately following any improvement implementation is typically the most important in determining its long-term impact. That's because new positive habits have yet to be formed. It's only natural to expect that there might be some backsliding. Scientists refer to this tendency as "entropy."

To ensure that the improvement sticks, it's a good idea to intentionally audit the new standard from day one. This means proactively scheduling time, perhaps as part of normal employee rounding, to view firsthand and dis-

cuss the new standard with impacted employees as they go about their workday.

The frequency of audits can be reduced, but never stopped, as it becomes obvious that habits are forming around the new standard.

The difference between auditing the standard and auditing the employee is subtle, but important. The former assumes that most employees want to do a good job and are willing to follow the known best process. The audit then becomes a tool for identifying barriers that make it difficult for employees to follow the standard and a means for discussing improvement ideas to the standard rather than an attempt to find people violating the Standard Work.

Several developments can occur with a newly implemented process that result in a gap between the process used and the Standard Work:

• What seemed obvious during the controlled training session might be less clear once one starts working alone; perhaps the Standard Work document needs to be refined.

• A scenario pops up in the real world that wasn't anticipated during the creation of the standard.

• Employees might not be able to produce the product or service at their historical rate, simply because they are on the steep portion of the learning curve.

Left unaddressed, each of these situations can result in a reversion to, or at least toward, the old process. Auditing and timely addressing issues with the improvement confirms your commitment to moving forward.

Occasionally auditing will reveal individuals who are unwilling to follow the known best process, opting instead for "my way." In these cases it is time to put on the coaching hat.

It's appropriate to reiterate the "why behind the what" of the standard. It's important to listen to the employee's concerns, being especially alert for legitimate barriers and/or improvement ideas while reinforcing the appropriate avenues for communicating them rather than changing the process willy-nilly on their own.

Ultimately, those unwilling to follow Standard Work must be held accountable, subject to disciplinary action consistent with other violations of organizational policies. Anything less undermines the effectiveness of one of the most valuable tools in the continuous improvement toolbox.

> **RICK SAYS**
>
> The time period immediately following any improvement implementation is typically the most important in determining its long-term impact. That's because new positive habits have yet to be formed. It's only natural to expect that there might be some backsliding. Scientists refer to this tendency as "entropy."