Continuous Improvement – A Top Down/Bottom Up Approach?
Project Report

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Manchester Metropolitan University 2011
Funded by LFHE Small Development Project and Manchester Metropolitan University
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Section 1 – Introduction

About Manchester Metropolitan University

Manchester Metropolitan University is the largest campus based undergraduate university in the UK with over 4,000 staff supporting a total student population of over 37,000. The University is a University of and for the region, with 56% of its students coming from the North West and around 70% staying in the region to work. The University’s mission is to be the University for World Class Professionals with an emphasis on vocational education and employability, and a broad change agenda was established in 2007 to ensure that this claim is met.

Given this change agenda, the University has been going through a process of radical change over the last few years. More recently, departments and teams are taking the opportunity to look at the impact of these changes: to assess what is working well and to recognise those areas where improvement is needed. This has been supported by the University’s successful application for the Investors in People standard (a framework for business improvement), participation in the LFHE’s Change Academy along with other initiatives such as value for money workshops and greater recognition that “plan and do” needs to be supported by “review”.

However, the introduction of the new funding structure for 2012 and proposals for Key Information Sets (KIS) will result in even greater focus on the drive to continually improve. With the increased demands on departments and staff to achieve even greater quality and value for money, there is an emphasis on providing more for less. This means that for staff ‘working smarter’ will be a priority and the capacity to respond to change and innovate will be a key skill. Manchester Metropolitan University’s espoused values seek to encourage creativity and enterprise, and though it is often said that staff who work at the sharp end know what works and what does not, and will have the best ideas on how to make improvements, in a large bureaucratic organisation supporting and achieving this can be challenging.

Requests to the Organisation Development and Training Team are starting to take a familiar pattern, where a senior manager recognises that improvement is needed in a particular area, and identifies the need to support the team to bring about a change in the most effective way. The management team is therefore involved in the “pre-adoption” and “adoption” activities, and team involvement starts from the “implementation” stage (Trowler, Saunders and Knight, 2003). This is the “top down” approach to continuous improvement which is referred to throughout this report.

However, it is suggested that there is an alternative approach, where not only the actions but also the identification of the need for continuous improvement come from the team members themselves. The work with the team therefore starts from the first stage – with the needs analysis and identification of priorities being carried out within the team.
This is the “bottom up” approach to continuous improvement which is referred to throughout the report.

**Project Overview**

The overall aim of this project is to assess the value of taking a bottom up approach to continuous improvement compared to more traditional top down methods.

The following objectives were identified:

- to provide an evidence base for advising managers on the importance or otherwise of engaging staff in identifying continuous improvement needs – and in particular in relation to service/business improvement;
- to identify the advantages/disadvantages of taking a top down approach to continuous improvement;
- to identify the advantages/disadvantages of taking a bottom up approach to continuous improvement;
- to make recommendations about the benefits of using either a top down/bottom up approach in a range of situations within higher education;
- to identify the situations in which either approach might be most appropriate;
- to identify best practice to share with the wider higher education community; and
- to contribute to the University’s own employee engagement strategy.

Our approach has been to identify two small projects and to follow structured but different approaches to continuous improvement activities for each. Both projects were supported by the Organisation Development and Training Team and included managers and staff taking part in facilitated sessions to identify priority areas for improvement and then implementing the ideas generated. The two departments/teams volunteered to take part and both involved staff from the University’s support functions. There was no particular reason for this, but support services at the University are having to cope with increased expectations from both internal and external customers with reduced resources.

The following case studies reflect two different approaches to continuous improvement. In the first case study, the team was split into two distinct groups: those with line management responsibilities and those with no management responsibilities. Individuals remained in these two separate groups, of managers and staff, for the various improvement activities. In the second case study, a joint approach was taken with one large group of senior managers, managers and staff participating in the improvement sessions as one team.

The main emphasis of the facilitated continuous improvement sessions was for staff to identify and prioritise areas for improvement.
Section 2 - Case studies

Case Study 1 – Recruitment and Admissions

Background

The Recruitment and Admissions Department provides an enquiries and admission service to potential Manchester Metropolitan University students from first enquiry through to enrolment. The Department delivers services to enquirers, potential students, applicants, Manchester Metropolitan University staff and external stakeholders such as schools and businesses.

Following a discussion with the Department’s senior management team, it was agreed that “managing leads” would be the focus for the continuous improvement sessions. What is meant by “managing leads” is how information from potential applicants is gathered and used by the department. Currently, information on potential applicants is gathered by staff from across the whole of the Recruitment and Admissions teams in a number of ways, e.g. via postcards, telephone enquiries and at promotional events. The way that information is captured and the type of information captured varies, and processes and systems used to interpret, store and manage the data can be inconsistent, resource intensive and time consuming.

Subsequently, the following project outline was agreed.

Project Title
Review and improve collection and collation of leads and data on potential applicants (enquirers) in the Recruitment and Admissions Team

Aims
To review what information is collected, when it is collected, how it is collected, why the information is needed, how it is used, how much it costs to interpret, input and store the data and to identify improvements.

Objectives were defined as

By the end of the project the Recruitment and Admissions team will have:
・ a clear outline of the current situation
・ identified and reviewed improvement ideas and suggestions from both staff and managers
・ prioritised suggestions to be implemented
・ implemented the proposed improvements for the 2012 campaign
A broader aim for the project was to involve staff from across all areas of the team, including admissions and course enquiries, especially to build knowledge and understanding of different roles, responsibilities and actions in relation to the topic. Another expectation was that any data collected would be cleaner, easier to store and faster to access.

**Approach**

For this project, it was decided to work with two separate groups. One group would comprise of senior managers and the second would comprise of a group of staff. The aim of this was to identify any differences between the improvement priorities generated by managers and those generated by staff. Both groups attended facilitated sessions, which are outlined in full in the Continuous Improvement Toolkit.

**1. Briefing sessions**

This was an informal meeting to:
- outline the background, aims and objectives for the project;
- answer any questions and alleviate any concerns;
- brief staff to gather as much information as possible, from others in their area/team, around current process practice; and
- establish perceived values within the team.

**Activity to establish perceived values**

The values activity used a card sort exercise based on a questionnaire called *Window on Work Values* (see *Values Activity* in the Continuous Improvement Toolkit). This questionnaire was developed by Dick McGann (2002) and explores how behaviour at work is influenced by values.

The purpose of this activity was to explore the perceived values within the Recruitment and Admissions Team to identify any values within the team that would support/hinder a culture of continuous improvement.

The *Window on Work Values* model consists of eight core work value types. It is divided into quadrants, each containing a core value type as follows: organisational constraint; organisational freedom; self focus; and group focus. For a culture of continuous improvement, the key value type is organisational freedom, with group focus also of importance to ensure that changes are introduced as a team.

Within the Recruitment and Admissions Team, the four values identified by the two groups were those that represent an environment that values group focus and organisational freedom (Equality, Empowerment and Independence). Only one statement was selected in relation to organisational constraint.
Had the team selected values and beliefs from the organisational constraints sector, this may have indicated that continuous improvement activity may be stifled because of a strong need for authority, conformity and compliance. However, this exploration of the team’s values indicated an environment that would foster change and improvement.

2. Continuous Improvement Workshops

A second workshop was then held to review what information is collected, when it is collected, why the information is needed, how it is used, how much it costs to interpret, input and store the data and to identify improvement ideas and priorities.

Aims and objectives for the session included:
- to produce a map that shows the current situation of how leads are managed and the process as it currently operates; and
- to identify and prioritise ideas and improvements.

The session commenced with an activity to map the “managing leads” process as it operated currently (see Process Improvement – Mapping Activity in the Continuous Improvement Toolkit). This was followed by several creativity activities to identify ideas and improvements which were then prioritised.

Outputs /Outcomes

Following the sessions all the information generated was captured and circulated to both the staff and managers that had taken part.

Outputs included:
- a current process summary for managing leads, for each area within the Recruitment and Admissions team, including lists of process problems and delays;
- increased understanding of the perceived values and beliefs within the team;
- prioritised lists of ideas and improvement priorities; and
- increased understanding of roles and responsibilities across the team.

Following the facilitated sessions, offers of ongoing support were made to the team but these were not taken up. In March, a review meeting was held with two of the team’s managers to discuss evaluation and at this stage some of the key outcomes were shared. These included:

- the data input of information from postcards completed at UCAS events had been outsourced to an external company;
- the postcards used at UCAS events had been updated;
- information business cards had been redesigned to signpost enquirers to the website; and
- a dedicated landing page had been added to the website.
As a result of the above improvements, the data collected at UCAS events is now entered much more quickly than previously, achieving a turn around time of one week. There is also improved accuracy in terms of the data recorded. This results in faster access time and a quicker response to students who have requested a prospectus.

**Evaluation**

A survey was developed using BOS (Bristol Online Survey) which was completed by 6 of the 8 staff and 2 out of 5 managers who had taken part in the workshops. This was followed up with 5 additional 1-1 interviews with 2 managers and 3 members of the team.

**Summary of Key Findings**

Some staff did not perceive the project, to improve the managing leads process, to be as important as their managers did. This view was supported by the feedback that, if any individual was not directly involved in UCAS events or working in the Education Liaison team, although they felt it important for others in the team and could see the necessity to improve the process, it did not have a direct impact on their work.

Managers felt that more progress had been made in implementing ideas than staff in the team (managers giving an average rating of 9.5 and staff 5.3 out of 10 where 10 = significant progress made).

All staff were able to describe the broad aims and objectives for the project but managers felt more ownership for the aims of the project than staff.

Staff felt moderate ownership for the ideas generated whereas managers felt complete ownership (managers giving an average rating of 8.5 and staff 4.8 out of 10 where 10 = complete ownership).

Both managers and staff felt that they were very involved in identifying improvement ideas and actions (managers giving an average rating of 10 and staff 7.5 out of 10 where 10 = very involved).

Managers felt very involved in planning the implementation of ideas/improvements where staff reported low involvement (managers giving an average rating of 10 and staff 4.6 out of 10 where 10 = very involved).

Managers felt they were very involved in implementing ideas and improvement actions in the work team whereas staff reported moderate involvement, again it very much depended on individual experience relating to what area of the team staff worked in.

General quotes and comments included:
• It was excellent to get together as a team and learn about each others’ roles, responsibilities and how we all approach data collection;
• It helped to provide a fresh approach and to consider alternatives;
• It made me feel my opinion was valued and would make a difference;
• Some people felt that after the initial workshops they were not involved in taking things forward and were not kept informed of progress and what was being taken forward;
• Actions seemed to be taken forward by a few key people, especially managers;
• Several staff felt that implementation was “beyond our control” or their role was to “pass ideas up to senior management”;
• For longer term success staff felt that there was a need for clear leadership, to project manage, identify clear priorities, establish objectives and commit resources, review and monitor progress;
• Several staff mentioned the term “drive” and it was felt that after the initial workshops the project lacked drive and that senior management commitment was necessary to drive the improvement actions forward and make it happen.

Analysis

Interestingly, the ideas generated by the senior managers and staff members were almost identical, demonstrating a shared understanding about what was needed by both managers and staff. However, the key difference seems to be in taking forward actions following the initial session. Whereas managers felt ownership for the ideas generated, staff members felt only moderate ownership, despite the fact that they had developed these ideas without the management team present. There was a perception that senior managers had not driven the improvement actions forward, demonstrating the team’s understanding about where responsibility for actions lay. There was also a mismatch between what the team understood had happened and what had actually been put in place, as in reality the majority of the actions identified during the session appear to have been actioned.
Section 2 - Case studies

Case Study 2 – Faculty Finance Team

Background

Faculty Finance Offices provide a service to faculty based staff and students on a range of financial issues. The team takes payments for tuition fees, short courses, field trips, replacement library cards etc.; provides advice on bursaries and other student finance queries; and agrees payment plans with student debtors. The team also provides an accounts payable function; processing expense claims, and undertaking operational finance functions such as processing journals, setting up short courses, liaising with faculty accountants and faculty based staff.

The team has the opportunity to move to a more suitable office, which will enable it to reduce the number of locations over which it operates. Initially, this will combine three faculty finance teams in one central location. A fourth team will also be re-located into this central team at a later date.

The new office is much more open and accessible, with a separate secure cashiering function, so will feel very different for staff as the glass barrier between themselves and staff and students will be removed.

Initial discussions took place with managers to explore working with the team to focus on the move as an opportunity for continuous improvement. Initially, the managers identified very specific objectives and outcomes for the project but after discussion, decided not to share these and to work instead with the improvement ideas generated by the team (a bottom up approach).

Project Title
*Implementing a Central Faculty Financial Services Office for Humanities, Art & Design and Science and Engineering*

Aims

How can we manage the transition from several offices into one and develop new ways of working?

Objectives were defined as

By the end of the project the Faculty Finance Officers and the Finance Assistants will have:
- a broader understanding of the roles and responsibilities of everyone in our team;
- identified how the glassless desk will affect our service and the way we present ourselves;
• identified strengths and what is working well alongside any improvements we can make to our service;
• addressed individual and group concerns relating to the office move; and
• developed an action plan.

A key aim of the managers was to involve staff from the various teams in planning and implementing transition both to the new location but also to new ways of working.

Approach

For this project we decided to work with one mixed group of senior managers and staff and **not** to split them. This would enable joint exploration of bottom up ideas and joint discussion of the improvement priorities generated by staff. Managers and staff from across various faculty finance teams attended the following facilitated sessions, including staff from offices which would not be affected immediately by the planned move. Both sessions are outlined in full in the Continuous Improvement Toolkit.

1. Briefing Session

This was an informal meeting to outline the background, aims and objectives for the project, to answer any questions and brief staff for the second session.

Rather than undertake the values activity, it was agreed that it was extremely important to provide time for staff and managers to raise concerns and discuss the planned move, in general, before asking them to generate improvement ideas and look at new ways of working.

As a result, the session focused on several areas including helping staff get to know each other better, sharing roles and responsibilities and a general question and answer session to discuss any concerns in relation to the move. This was balanced by two activities to explore what is working well (things to keep/maintain when we move) and what staff were looking forward to about the move.

2. Continuous Improvement Workshop

A second workshop was then held to focus on continuous improvement and ideas generation.

The session commenced with a visioning activity to identify what the new office would look, feel and sound like. This was followed by several creativity activities to identify ideas and improvements which were then prioritised and an action plan developed.

Outputs /Outcomes

Following the sessions, all the information generated was captured and circulated to everyone who had taken part. Outputs included:
• An action plan for the key improvement suggestions around:
   developing a team slogan
   developing standards for customer service
   customer communication (leaflets, business cards, signage)
   a communication plan for key stakeholders (academics, support colleagues)
   training and knowledge sharing
   practicalities in relation to the move
• Staff volunteered to be in several small project groups to implement the action plan
• Managers agreed to provide bi-weekly updates
• Increased understanding of what staff want the new office environment to be like
• Lists of ideas and improvement suggestions in relation to the above
• Increased understanding of roles and responsibilities across the team
• Decreased levels of concern about the whole move

Following the two facilitated sessions offers of ongoing support were made by the Organisation Development and Training Team to the team which resulted in a further facilitated meeting. Objectives were to review progress against the action plan and to establish a timeline, as the date for the move had been agreed. Outcomes shared at this session included:

• A web account had been set up where staff could post questions, update on progress and share documents
• New business cards for students had been designed and printed
• Staff had already started to work across sites and base themselves in different offices in preparation for the move
• Deans and Faculty Executive Groups affected by the move had all been visited and a presentation about the moves developed and disseminated
• A student/customer satisfaction questionnaire had been implemented

Evaluation

A survey was developed using BOS (Bristol Online Survey) which was completed by 5 staff and 3 managers, who had taken part in the workshops. This was followed up with 3 additional 1:1 interviews with 1 manager and 2 members of the team.

Summary of Key Findings

Some staff did not rate the project to be as important as their managers’ perception of importance. However staff rated the project as important for others in the team and identified reasons such as better cover, less understaffed offices, open services for students/staff and creating better customer service (managers giving an average rating of 9.3 and staff 6.4 out of 10 where 10 = extremely important).
Both managers and staff felt that some progress had been made in implementing ideas but that progress was not significant. This could be due to the timing of the move, which was still 6 months away, and that many of the ideas cannot be implemented until the team is in situ (managers giving an average rating of 7.3 and staff 4.2 out of 10 where 10 = significant progress made).

All staff were able to describe the broad aims and objectives for the project but managers felt more ownership for the aims of the project than staff, 3/5 staff reported high levels of ownership (managers giving an average rating of 9 and staff 5.4 out of 10 where 10 = complete ownership).

3 out of 5 staff indicated that they felt high levels of ownership for the ideas generated whereas all managers felt strong ownership (managers giving an average rating of 8 and staff 5.6 out of 10 where 10 = complete ownership).

All managers and staff felt that they were involved in identifying improvement ideas and actions, 3/5 staff felt very involved (managers giving an average rating of 9.6 and staff 6.8 out of 10 where 10 = very involved).

Managers felt very involved in planning the implementation of ideas/improvements whereas all staff reported moderate to high involvement (managers giving an average rating of 9 and staff 5.5 out of 10 where 10 = very involved).

Managers reported feeling very involved in implementing ideas and improvement actions in the work team and all staff reported moderate to high involvement (managers giving an average rating of 9.5 and staff 5.8 out of 10 where 10 = very involved).

All staff and managers feel that service users will benefit to a great extent from the improvements being planned.

General quotes and comments included:

- It will create better customer service, there will be more opportunities to gain knowledge of other faculties and maybe create new and exciting projects.
- Comments from staff about what has enabled them to progress ideas in the workplace included “motivation by management”, “regular updates from management”, “managers have encouraged me to make progress and knowing they are 100% behind the move and answering staff questions”.
- On why staff felt ownership, comments included “because we are being given/deciding on projects to do regarding the new office” and “taking a role in all discussions about the new office”, “Because my ideas are being taken into account and we are developing projects based on my ideas”.
- In between the meetings a few members of staff felt it was really important for managers to be following up on actions and a reminder email from managers would help chase progress.
• It was good having the mini project groups but they need a coordinator as finding the time to plan meetings was difficult and it would be good to have additional support from managers for the groups in between the workshops.

Analysis

The key difference between this case study and the first was that managers and staff identified the priorities for continuous improvement together, within the same workshop.

Considering the evaluation results of both case studies, there is a difference in staff perception of their involvement in identifying ideas. While Recruitment and Admissions staff scaled their involvement in identifying ideas at 7.5, the Finance staff scaled their involvement slightly lower, at 6.8. Evidently, there are other factors to consider (not least that the areas for improvement identified were very different), but one reason for this difference in perception may be the shared workshop. Having managers present during the formation of ideas could have left staff members with the perception of being less involved at this stage.

However, in terms of ownership for taking actions forward, while Recruitment and Admissions staff rated their ownership at 4.8, Finance staff rated their ownership at 5.6. The qualitative information also indicated greater ownership within the Finance team, with comments about the projects that they were undertaking. Again, there are other factors to consider, but the fact that managers and staff identified the priorities and action planned together could have been a key influence. The suggestion is that, in having managers physically present during the “adoption” stage, members of staff may have felt that they had the permission to take ownership for taking particular actions forward. This was perhaps the “pay-off” for members of staff not feeling as involved in the “pre-adoption” stage.

Clearly, this is too small-scale a project to draw any definite conclusions around this, but this provides some helpful factors to consider when planning for continuous improvement activities – and making decisions about the point at which to involve managers. What this offers is three options for continuous improvement identification activities:

1. **Top-down approach** - improvement ideas and suggestions are identified primarily by senior managers/managers and staff are not involved/engaged until the implementation stage.

2. **Bottom-up approach** - improvement ideas and suggestions are identified primarily by staff and endorsed by senior managers/managers prior to implementation.

3. **Bottom-up approach to continuous improvement identification at “pre-adoption” stage, with joint approach at “adoption”** - Improvement ideas and suggestions are identified primarily by staff before managers and staff work together to prioritise and action plan prior to implementation.

The pros and cons of each of these options are described in Section 3.
Section 3 – Summary of Best Practice Basics

The following recommendations are drawn from the two continuous improvement projects described above. This is a very specific and limited sample/evidence base on which to draw conclusions, so careful consideration would evidently need to be given to any future situation before an approach is taken.

Top-down approach to continuous improvement identification

Improvement ideas and suggestions are identified primarily by senior managers/managers and staff are not involved/engaged until the implementation stage.

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<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>When to use</th>
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<tr>
<td>Enables improvement actions to be implemented quickly when working with tight deadlines and limited resources.</td>
<td>Senior managers and managers may end up taking on a key role in implementing actions as staff feel little ownership.</td>
<td>A top down approach may work well when there is only one clear solution or improvement option to follow. When action needs to be taken very quickly. When action has to be taken across the organisation with little or no room for manoeuvre.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior managers can push through changes that they consider to be necessary.</td>
<td>Staff are unaware of what progress/changes are being instigated and may be cynical about or not buy in to new ways of working.</td>
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<td>Even in a team where staff feel empowered, it may encourage a culture where staff cease to be proactive and feel powerless to make improvements, perceiving it to be a senior management/management responsibility.</td>
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Bottom-up approach to continuous improvement identification

Improvement ideas and suggestions are identified primarily by staff and endorsed by senior managers/managers prior to implementation.

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<td>Ideas and suggestions come from those who are actually doing the job, there is no monopoly on good ideas. Many different suggestions and good ideas may be generated, exceeding management expectations.</td>
<td>Involving staff raises expectations that their ideas will be considered and taken forward. Ideas may not be compatible with management preferences.</td>
<td>Works well when improvement solutions are not clear and there are many different options to be considered.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased staff ownership and commitment means that staff are more willing and motivated to take the lead and implement ideas. It may be easier to get volunteers for mini project groups or to find individuals volunteering to take actions forward.</td>
<td>It may take longer to turn ideas into action, and still clearly needs management support in terms of drive, resource allocation, helping staff prioritise, objective setting, monitoring and progress review.</td>
<td>When senior managers are committed to listening to staff and willing to take different ideas and suggestions on board.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff feel less threatened by change or less concerned about new ways of working. More in control.</td>
<td></td>
<td>When staff perceive change as threatening or have concerns about implementing new working practices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourages a culture where staff feel empowered to continually make small improvements with low resource investment.</td>
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<td>When there is time for consultation, engagement and involvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff see improvement as part of their job and not a management responsibility.</td>
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<td>When the actions taken will have an impact on the immediate team, but will have a limited impact on other teams/ the wider organisation.</td>
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**Bottom-up approach to continuous improvement identification at “pre-adoption” stage, with joint approach at “adoption”**

Improvement ideas and suggestions are identified primarily by staff before managers and staff work together to prioritise and action plan prior to implementation.

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<td>Ideas may not be compatible with management preferences.</td>
<td>Works well when improvement solutions are not clear and there are many different options to be considered.</td>
</tr>
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<td>The adoption stage provides an opportunity for discussion as well as a learning opportunity for both managers and staff as to why ideas should/should not be adopted.</td>
<td></td>
<td>When senior managers are committed to listening to staff and willing to take different ideas and suggestions on board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased staff ownership and commitment means that staff are more willing and motivated to take the lead and implement ideas. It may be easier to get volunteers for mini project groups or to find individuals volunteering to take actions forward.</td>
<td></td>
<td>When staff perceive change as threatening or have concerns about implementing new working practices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objectives and actions can be discussed and agreed during one meeting, so ideas can be turned more quickly into action.</td>
<td>Still clearly needs a lot of management support in terms of drive, resource allocation, monitoring and progress review.</td>
<td>When there is time for consultation, engagement and involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff feel less threatened by change or less concerned about new ways of working. More in control.</td>
<td></td>
<td>When the actions taken will have an impact on other teams, departments and the wider organisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Encourages a culture where staff feel empowered to continually make small improvements with low resource investment and are supported to do so.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Staff see improvement as part of their job and not a management responsibility.</strong></td>
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Summary – Critical Success Factors

The two case studies identified a number of critical success factors, primarily that successful continuous improvement involves inputs from both “top” and “bottom”. These success factors are:

1. Management Commitment

For a bottom up approach to be successful there is a clear need for strong leadership and a definite role for senior managers and managers to play. Their key role is to provide drive and focus to improvement activities by:

- Dedicating space and time for specific improvement activities to take place within the team. This could be one off events and workshops or by allocating time slots within existing activities such as team meetings or 1:1s to focus on idea generation and improvement activities.
- Considering all suggestions thoroughly and providing timely feedback on those to be taken forward and those that can’t, with a clear explanation of why not.
- Establishing and communicating improvement priorities and objectives.
- Allocating improvement objectives to groups or individuals.
- Allocating any resource necessary for improvement ideas to be implemented, especially time.
- Ensuring clear processes are agreed for reporting on progress, monitoring implementation and reviewing impact.
- Overall project management.

2. Facilitation Skills

In order for staff to feel that they are able to openly talk about concerns, problems and make improvement suggestions, there needs to be a culture of openness and trust. Both managers and staff involved in the two projects at Manchester Metropolitan University reported that it was extremely beneficial having an external facilitator who was not a member of the team. The facilitator’s role included:

- creating a space and environment in which staff feel able to contribute
- ensuring all suggestions and ideas raised are captured and considered
- maintaining equal status within conversations and group discussions
- ensuring active listening
- providing processes and interventions to help members identify & achieve their goals and make quality decisions

Many managers have excellent facilitation skills which they could use to support other teams across the organisation. In committing to embedding a culture of continuous improvement into the DNA of the organisation, it might be helpful to establish a resource
of trained facilitators and provide them with a toolkit of creativity, innovation and improvement materials.

3. Involvement

There is evidence to suggest from the two case studies that early involvement prior to the implementation stage increases staff commitment and decreases staff concern about imposed change/improvements.

Further, by working as one team including senior managers, managers and staff, a key benefit of early involvement was the sharing of knowledge and experience that enhanced understanding, enabled informed discussions and increased team learning.

Feedback emphasised the need for involvement to extend beyond any initial involvement (event) and stressed the need for an agreed plan regarding how involvement would be maintained, including clear information about:

- Who will be involved in decision making and how?
- Who will be involved in implementation?
- How everyone involved will be kept informed and updated

4. Communication

Evaluation of the two case studies revealed that whilst those who had been closely involved in implementing improvement ideas and actions had a clear awareness of progress made, those who had not been directly involved were unable to give details of outcomes or improvements.

This highlights a clear need for:

- clearly communicating those improvement ideas which are a priority and how they are to be taken forward alongside any that are not to be taken forward and why
- providing regular progress updates for all staff involved
- planning activities to celebrate successful outcomes
- developing a communication plan alongside any project/implementation plan

Maintaining communication with all those involved is critical. Otherwise, staff may perceive their involvement or the project to be a waste of time and effort. Without feedback, staff will believe that nothing has changed or that senior managers do not listen or act on suggestions raised by staff, which leads to a culture where innovation and continuous improvement is stifled.
Section 4 – Managers’ Toolkit

All tools and resources that were used during the two projects are available to access at:

http://www.mmu.ac.uk/humanresources/changeacademy/

Suggested uses

The tools can be used for a wide range of purposes, whether by a manager or a facilitator. The following are some suggestions:

- To review an existing process
- To generate ideas for a new system or approach
- To encourage more creative thinking during a team meeting
- To provide a structure for moving from ideas generation to action planning
- For consultation activities with different staff groups and stakeholders
- To gather ideas from students as part of a tutor group or wider session
- To unblock/unlock thinking about a topic area or a piece of work, whether with a staff member or student
- With a project team at the beginning of a project, to ensure all opportunities are explored and to encourage team working

Section 5 - Further Information

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the following people who have provided support throughout this project:

Mel Peters, Finance and Legal Services, and all the team involved in the Finance project
Marianne Knowles, Recruitment and Admissions, and all the team involved in the Recruitment and Admissions project
Paul Walsh, Organisation Development and Training Team, for his support in developing the evaluation
Manchester Metropolitan University’s Continuous Improvement Project Board for their comment and commitment to the project and
Stuart Hunt, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education for his guidance and comment throughout the project
Contacts

Finally, if you use any of the toolkit resources and would be willing to share your experiences, please contact:

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We would love to share ideas and practice!
Section 6 – Addendum to the Report

Update on other uses of the toolkit following publication

Following publication of the continuous improvement toolkit and taking into account learning from the initial case studies, a range of activities have taken place:

Manchester Metropolitan University’s internal Change Academy

The toolkit and learning have been advertised through the University’s change network, which has been set up as part of the internal Change Academy at Manchester Metropolitan University. The tools have been made available electronically and plans are in place to share the tools during network meetings. This is an early step towards the project recommendation to utilise the facilitation skills of managers and staff across the University.

Transforming for a New Future – Workshop to Develop Change Management Skills

The Organisation Development and Training Team has developed a new workshop to develop the change management skills of managers. Given the current environment, this workshop starts by setting the present and future context for higher education and Manchester Metropolitan University and helps participants to appreciate the role of the manager/leader in the process of transformational working. However, the workshop then supports managers to take a bottom-up approach to bringing about improvements. Techniques from the Continuous Improvement Toolkit are used to demonstrate to managers how to guide and support their teams to make transformational working a part of their team’s culture. Though the workshop is still in its infancy (approximately 6 sessions have been run in the last 6 months), the evaluation so far has been very positive and there is evidence that some of the techniques have been used within local teams, including Flower word Association and PMI.

Facilities Supervisors

A simplified version of the toolkit has been adapted for use by supervisors across the University. This was as a result of feedback that the full toolkit is more suited to those who are experienced facilitators/managers. This toolkit is being rolled out as part of a management development programme for facilities supervisors to enable them to identify continuous improvement opportunities with their staff.

South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce – Project to Embed the Chamber’s Portal

External to the University, the tools and learning have been used with the South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce. This intervention was the result of a request to the Organisation Development and Training Team at Manchester Metropolitan University to
support the South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce in embedding its forthcoming online Portal. The “bottom-up” approach to identifying continuous improvement needs was used, where all staff in the South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce Team were involved from pre-adoption stage.

Taking the 3 stage continuous improvement model, the first focus of the sessions was to “stop before you start”. Therefore, the session started with an activity around mapping the membership journey and how this may be affected by the introduction of the portal. In doing this, all members of the team were encouraged to reflect on the implications at each stage of the membership journey. This activity naturally moved into the “ideas generation” stage, with all thoughts captured by the facilitators. To move consideration of the implications onto actual action planning, the actions that arose were then prioritised by the group using the decision making matrix on the scale of efforts/cost and benefit.

On this occasion, there was a tight window in which to move to actions which could have led to a top-down approach. However, by involving all members of the portal team in the “pre-adoption” and “adoption” activities, this enabled shared ownership of ideas generated.