



A PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL LANCASHIRE

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FOREWORD

When I joined the University of Central Lancashire as director of human resources in 2000, the university had already recognised that many of its administrative procedures were not as effective or efficient as they needed to be. To me, it seemed that a lot of staff had no clear understanding of the purpose and potential outcomes of the procedures they were working with. Their role was to follow procedure; it was not their job to be concerned about outcomes. It was often difficult to work out who was ultimately responsible for any given process, and therefore nobody took the initiative for review and improvement. The prevalent culture discouraged initiative and problem solving, and focused on the avoidance of risk. In short, it was the opposite of any concept of 'empowerment'.

At the same time, managers complained that members of staff referred far too many decisions upwards and did not accept responsibility for their actions.

A different approach was needed that would enable staff to analyse critically the processes with which they were involved and

encourage them to make improvements. At the same time, managers needed to understand how their own behaviour and expectations had to change if they wanted their staff to do their jobs differently.

So the continuous improvement programme had to deliver operational benefits quickly, and at the same time set the stage for more fundamental change in the way the university runs itself. Both objectives were at least to some extent achieved, and the following article provides an insight into the development and implementation of the adopted approach. However, the overall challenge remains: that of creating and sustaining an organisation where staff at all levels are encouraged and enabled to give of their best, and are no longer 'cogs in the machine'. When I left the university in 2004 there was still some way to go.

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CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

During 1999 the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN), like many other universities, undertook a strategic review, with the aim of repositioning itself for the challenge of the next decade. The overall theme of the review was 'Access to Excellence'. Outlined below is the way in which, through the establishment of a 'continuous improvement initiative', the university successfully promoted a programme of change within its administrative services.

To date, since June 2001, when the programme was first initiated, approximately 75% of administrative staff have taken part in

workshop activity. An important aim, therefore, is to contribute to the higher education sector-wide body of information from which others, contemplating such change initiatives, might draw.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Central Lancashire recognised that one of the essential strategic requirements for its future development was greater flexibility and a more responsive 'customer' or 'service user' focus. One of the major constraints to such aspirations becoming a reality was that many of the administrative processes and systems of the university were in need of improvement. Senior management

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felt that too many problems were being pushed up the organisational hierarchy rather than being resolved at the appropriate operational level. This scenario was regarded as symptomatic of a 'blame culture', characterised by a lack of willingness on the part of many staff to exercise initiative and resolve issues at the appropriate point for action. First attempts to address the problem involved traditional top-down approaches to consultation and analysis. The negligible results demonstrated that the way forward was unlikely to be found by adopting the very approaches that had generated the problems in the first place.

In September 2000, a new director of human resources was appointed and brought private sector experience of organisational change to the university. He persuaded colleagues to use external consultancy support to initiate a programme of 'continuous improvement' focusing on administrative systems and services and their associated cultures.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: THE BACKGROUND

When changes in university systems are initiated, a 'working party', usually involving supervisory and management-level personnel, is set up in order to work 'on' the systems. It is rarely the case that the people who work 'in' the systems are given a decisive role to play in such working parties. From the outset, the continuous improvement programme at UCLAN adopted a different approach. Attention focused on members of staff working 'in' the administrative systems and a development programme was designed to give them the requisite skills, and hence the confidence, to improve their working operations.

The programme provides individual members of staff with the necessary expertise to make improvements, whilst allowing them the latitude to exercise initiative and make procedural and systems changes as appropriate. Generating 'ownership' and 'empowering' staff in this way promotes one of the key principles of continuous improvement, namely that the people closest to the action have the best ideas for improvement. With appropriate leadership, training and support, people can then be encouraged to put their ideas into practice.

Continuous improvement is now at the heart of a comprehensive approach to organisational change at UCLAN. A key element in the development programme focuses on the 'primacy' of the customer; not simply the external customer but also the internal customer (generally a colleague in another area or section), who may be directly supplied with a service or output.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: THE PROGRAMME

The outline below summarises the overall process used to underpin the introduction of a continuous improvement culture at UCLAN. Additional detail is provided in Figure 1.

Stage 1: An intensive two-day 'Management of Change' workshop, resulting in the development of an 'action plan'. This provides the context for operational improvements and ensures proposed projects fit with strategic priorities.

Stage 2: 'Continuous Improvement' workshop:
Day one – introduction to the philosophy and principles of continuous improvement and related techniques.

Working in teams, staff apply the techniques to their own work-related problem/project area.

Project formulation – following day one there is a period of two to three weeks during which teams negotiate access to the people, sections and data/information required to progress their particular project.

Day two – the objectives of teams' projects are clarified and documented. Teams are then introduced to 'project planning' and, with support, develop a detailed project plan, Gantt chart and schedule for action.

Stage 3: Teams engage in a series of working meetings in line with the project timetable.

NB. On completion of the workshop sessions, teams are not abandoned. They have access to ongoing support from both the 'continuous improvement team' in the HR section and the external consultant.

Although the continuous improvement initiative has been characterised by the core three-stage approach outlined above, it has not been a case of 'one size fits all'. Whilst maintaining conformity in terms of principles and techniques, modifications to the programme have been made to accommodate different departmental staffing and working arrangements. As new areas of the university get involved, they are advised to send a cross-section of staff to the initial 'Management of Change' workshop.

Arrangements that have worked particularly well are those where a small group of senior staff from a particular section have been accompanied by other more junior colleagues from the same section, selected on the basis that they represent all the key operational areas. For some senior managers this arrangement has provided an excellent opportunity for gaining more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of their junior colleagues. In many cases the experience has been cathartic. It has also demonstrated the value of an external facilitator in establishing a climate in which more sensitive unit/section or organisational issues can be aired and discussed.

Following the initial 'Management of Change' workshop, groups are advised to use the 'draft action plan' output as an opportunity for conducting an 'open forum' to obtain ideas for improvement from colleagues unable to attend the workshop. The net result of involving all staff from a particular unit or section in an open forum is the generation of a list of potential ideas to which everybody can feel some commitment.

Wherever possible, the Stage 2 workshop days have been organised to include participants from a range of different sections of the university. This is done to try and stimulate the development of 'cross-functional' teams. Research evidence suggests that the greatest opportunities for performance improvements often lie at functional interfaces (Rummler and Brache). The university therefore recognises that some of the major benefits to be derived from the continuous improvement initiative will result from improvements in university-wide systems.

A PROACTIVE PHILOSOPHY

The commitment to continuous development and improvement seeks to bring about real cultural change by focusing on operational staff and encouraging them to tackle the issues that frustrate them. The catch-phrase for the programme is 'just do it'. But this is not a case of encouraging a 'gung-ho' approach. Staff must work with and through their line managers. Equally, managers are encouraged to support and direct their staff to take ownership of problems and problem solving. All workshop sessions stress the need for actions to be based on hard evidence and a rigorous approach to problem solving. This is particularly the case in relation to the analysis and assessment of customer perceptions and customer requirements.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF THE STEERING GROUP

Overall coordination of the improvement programme has been via a steering group of representatives of the administrative areas directly involved. This group helps to ensure the dissemination of information and associated learning arising from improvements, thus reducing duplication of effort as new university sections get involved in the programme. The steering group was also conceived as an important body in sponsoring cross-functional and university-wide improvement projects.

Interestingly, as further cultural change initiatives have come on stream, the steering group has been transformed into the 'University Change Coordination Group' – a new body with a wider remit. This particular development resulted in a temporary hiatus in the 'sponsoring' and coordination role, but it would appear that the position of the continuous improvement initiative has been clarified and the resultant commitment to organisational change is back on course.

THE OUTCOMES

Inevitably, with such an all-encompassing university programme, there have been operational difficulties. One of the biggest challenges has arisen in relation to the issue of 'management control'. For staff to be able to make improvements they need appropriate latitude and support to take action. Difficulties have occurred in areas where local managers feel reluctant to relinquish any degree of control. The impact of such reluctance is that the 'improvement team' becomes demotivated, feeling they are constantly seeking permission (even to change the most minor of operational details) in order to proceed. In the worst case scenarios, this feeling of lack of ownership of improvement strategies can cause teams to give up.

Despite such local challenges the programme can be judged, overall, to be a success. As staff confidence is growing there is evidence that the 'blame culture' is being tackled. People recognise that under the banner of 'continuous improvement' the status quo can be challenged and they can be proactive in dealing with failing systems and procedures.

In financial terms, programme outcomes have justified the investment made. To focus purely on financial costs and benefits is, however, to hugely underestimate the overall benefits to the university. At the very least, the programme has resulted in the

majority of administrative staff receiving training in continuous improvement methodologies with specific emphasis on achieving outcomes. A typical participant comment at the end of the formal workshop activity is *"...this is the first time I have been involved in training and development which is directly relevant and applicable to my current activity."* Such comments are further supported by considerable anecdotal evidence of individuals implementing and applying ideas from the continuous improvement programme within and to their own job role.

For many colleagues, it is the first time that their ideas regarding the operational systems within which they work have been acted upon. The net result is a significant range of projects extending from very simple improvements, such as improved signage within a building, to major organisational initiatives. There is a website where teams are required to log project details; it is challenging, however, to keep abreast of all developments. 109 have been logged so far and there is evidence that more are under way. Given that some very small improvements have had an enormous impact on systems and processes, it is also difficult to select specific examples for special mention. The following three cases, however, provide some flavour of the issues and areas which have been tackled.

Example 1: One of the earliest successes for the initiative was a project undertaken in the debtor's section of the university finance department. A rigorous review of existing systems and procedures led to increased awareness of the key problems arising from significant debt. In turn, this heightened awareness resulted in a major reduction in the debt burden. The assessment made by the finance director was that the commitment to 'continuous improvement' had meant that the professional approach adopted in dealing with the problem had resulted in considerably enhanced understanding of the issues.

Example 2: One department signalled their commitment to continuous improvement by giving it a 'makeover' and branding it as the 'MAD' programme – 'Make a Difference'. They promoted the scheme with posters and fliers. The MAD scheme provides reward and recognition for staff who identify, and then contribute to, ways of making improvements. The scheme encourages staff to consider ideas under the following headings: communications, complexity, environment, innovation, morale, quality and resources. In addition to producing significant results the scheme has helped to sustain the momentum of the continuous improvement initiative.

Example 3: One notable initiative involved a project designed to assist the amalgamation and rationalisation of the work of two administrative departments, as part of a restructuring of two academic departments. An 'improvement team' was established and much of the detailed planning and reorganisation was left to the staff themselves. They saw the project as an opportunity to review and improve systems and ensure that best practice, regardless of which department it was derived from, was adopted. The degree of ownership engendered helped to ensure that, despite a tight deadline, amalgamation occurred with minimum anguish and conflict – elements that are almost endemic to management-imposed organisational change.

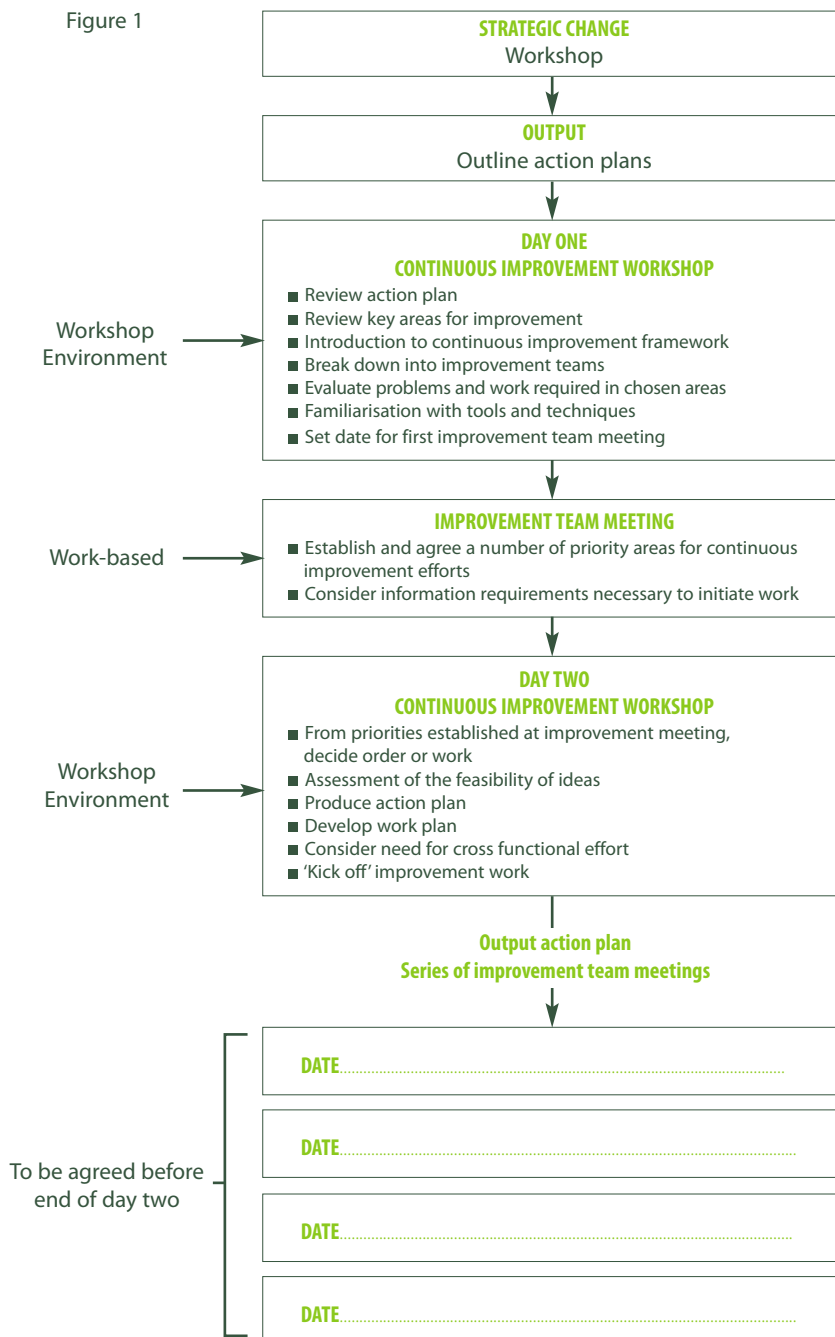
THE FUTURE CHALLENGE

It is still early days for this ambitious programme. It is worth remembering the brutal fact that about 70% of all change initiatives fail (Beer and Nohria). The acid test will be the extent to which the early commitment and enthusiasm can be maintained, so ensuring 'ongoing continuous improvement'. This is the challenge for management – to provide the leadership and create the context to ensure that the programme progresses from that of 'special initiative' to 'just the way we do things round here'.

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Figure 1



FURTHER INFORMATION

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