

Embedded Continuous Improvement – the foundation for establishing organization-wide excellence

By Stephen Walsh

Many forward thinking organizations have implemented project-led improvement initiatives. These have yielded tactical solutions that have delivered benefits. This project-led approach to gaining performance enhancement is more effective when integrated within a holistic approach to improvement, says Stephen Walsh of the process improvement consultants, The Burge Hughes Walsh Partnership. The consultancy's innovative Bronze-Silver-Gold System enables all types of organizations to engage all of their people and implement project-led schemes such as Six Sigma and Lean, within an overarching Embedded Continuous Improvement culture. This holistic programme has far reaching and long-lasting benefits.

Improvement programmes to help companies to cut out waste, boost efficiencies and deliver better customer service come in all shapes and sizes; some are highly complex, while others can be elegantly straightforward.

The main feature of many of these programmes is that they are project based. These do a great job of solving an issue via a team of dedicated people. Kaizen-Blitz workshops are a prime example of this when operated in isolation. The team will look at the problem, pick it apart and devise an effective solution.

With this approach there is very little opportunity of absorbing and ingraining the improvement as part of the culture of the entire organisation. Hence the need to make improvement something that is continuous and something that everyone can get involved in.

The Bronze-Silver-Gold (BSG) System is a proven step-by-step approach to continuous improvement that takes a holistic view of an organisation, helping everyone within it to create a culture that thrives on best practice and which is absorbed by each and every individual. This approach makes extensive use of various improvement tools, including training and workshops.

The various 'medals' are determined, thus: Bronze is awarded for doing what is supposed to be done but to the highest standard; Silver rewards those who have improved their processes and quality levels to

better satisfy their customers – internal or external and Gold is the accolade for world class practice as a recognisable description of daily activity in the service.

Everyone will have a part to play in the BSG System from junior to the most senior level. We have seen the effects of this holistic approach create a spirit of pride that promotes excellence throughout the organisation. Moreover, when people are proud of the organisation in which they work, they constantly strive to present the organisation in its best light.

Having recognised that an organisation wants to improve to a level it can recognise as being excellent – regardless of the driver or indeed drivers for improvement – it will begin at the Bronze level. This is a critical step in the BSG System and helps organizations gain a comprehensive understanding of what is important for the business. In essence it helps organizations identify what they need to do well and how they measure up to that. All of this revolves around a thorough self-administered audit. This helps the organisation appreciate its achievements and judge its progress towards Bronze standard.

An example of this is Aberdeenshire Council, an organisation determined to be the best in all it offers and does. To begin on its path towards excellence the Council set up pilot centres within its housing repairs depot in Peterhead as well as street cleansing depots in Inverurie (Souterford), Huntly and Ellon.

Working under the guidance of the Burge Hughes Walsh Partnership, Aberdeenshire Council determined the five following Bronze level qualifying requirements (QR):

QR1 The workplace – How we take pride in our workplace

QR2 Our role – How we contribute to service provision

QR3 Performance – How well we perform

QR4 Flexibility – How we work flexibly

QR5 Procedures – How we do our work.

The Souterford street cleansing staff have forged ahead and within three months implemented 5S principles to establish clean and tidy work areas. (5S is a philosophy and a way of organizing and managing the workspace and work flow thereby increasing efficiency, eliminating waste, improving flow and reducing process unreasonableness.) With cleaner and tidier work areas comes safer and more efficient working. In addition, the team has unravelled a cumbersome Code of Practice for Litter and Refuse into an

easy to follow schematic that the street cleansers can follow to meet performance standards. The team has also examined and revised its operating zones and routes to help plan capacity and optimise travel.

The Souterford team also identified waste – those activities determined as ineffective and not value-adding. This is a useful exercise for any organisation as it can dramatically reduce costs – both in financial terms and in time, which further impacts the bottom line. The key is to recognise its source and then amend procedures to reduce the waste or, preferably, eliminate it. Souterford's achievements resulted in increasing its capacity by a staggering 26 per cent, simply by changing the way it worked.

Another example of the success of the Burge Hughes Walsh BSG System is at Cooper Roller Bearings. This specialist engineering / manufacturing organisation had set its sights on becoming a world class operation. Part of its strategy was to implement cell-based production. Burge Hughes Walsh worked closely with the company's production managers and operators to develop best practices. The consultants tailored the programme to take into account set up reduction, 5S, work flow analysis, batch size reduction, elimination of non-value added activity and quality improvement. The culmination of the programme was the effective establishment of Embedded Continuous Improvement in the context of the work cells and their engagement in the business issues of the company.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that the BSG System wherever implemented is run by the people for the people. It complements very well project-based improvement activity, but engages a far wider section of the organisation's people, with emphasis on continuous improvement becoming a part of the mindset. This approach is crucial in ensuring everyone is on board and motivated to continuously improve their processes and manage their own daily operation. Burge Hughes Walsh consultants are involved as facilitators, mentoring the Continuous Improvement teams and managers and helping them to launch their programme to the organisation. The consultancy also helps to develop the various tools for monitoring and measuring the steps taken to meet the various Qualifying Requirements at each level.

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