Great Systems Process Kaizen Work System Improvement Tips

How to Improve Your Process Kaizen Work System

When we normally think about a process kaizen (continuous improvement) work system, we think about front line job waste reduction, such as on an assembly line.

Rarely do we think about the waste that might exist in management processes such as meetings, e-mail and texts, training, decision making, and project development.

Unfortunately, the waste in these 'higher level' processes might be more costly than those processes we use to create products or provide services daily. How do you measure and improve your process kaizen work system?

Sure, we talk about the need to hold effective meetings and measure the effectiveness of our training. We strive to reduce e-mail and text waste, and make sure we complete each project by the set deadline. How often do we consistently measure and trend the cycle time and waste levels of these everyday efforts?

How often do we fail to accomplish our meeting goals in the least amount of time possible? To what degree do we provide the maximum amount of learning at the lowest cost? If you are like most organizations, the answer may be "I really don't know."

What does a Best-in-Class Process Kaizen Work System Look Like

As human beings, we repeatedly execute the same personal processes each day. After all, we are creatures of habit. Unfortunately, we often devote little thought to how we might optimize the effectiveness of our daily work habits.

Think about how much time you spend each year as you get ready for work or prepare supper each night. Process effectiveness might not seem to matter here, unless you happen to say occasionally "I don't have time to do that." If effective time use matters to you, so should the effectiveness of your daily habits.

Top Process Improvement Work System Weaknesses

The Waste Maker

- Process improvement skill application is not consistent
- Improvements often result in job loss
- Multiple programs – past and present - create confusion
- Improvement tools are not used correctly
- Process costs are not known or understood very well
- Business literacy levels are too low
- Too little ownership in process improvement success
- Links to planning process are non-existent or limited
- Processes are not designed to meet all key customer needs
- Key processes have not been defined or measured properly

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The best organizations, such as those that aggressively pursue the **Malcolm Baldrige National Performance Excellence Award**, recognize that each employee owns at least one key process in their organization. Each leader takes steps to ensure that each employee, including those in management, knows what steps to take to ensure that their processes perform at an optimum level.

Most, if not all, staff use data to make decisions and solve problems. Teams and individuals use a variety of tools to take the waste out of their work processes. Process owners track both process throughput and process waste on a consistent, daily basis to make sure that progress is made. All work team members are always on the lookout for better ways to meet the needs of each process's customers. Process improvement equals daily kaizen.

The Process of Process Kaizen (Continuous Improvement)

Process kaizen is a process itself. Good process managers can identify process steps, process waste streams, and key process metrics. Process owners regularly work with their internal or external customers to identify those key requirements that a given process should meet. They can demonstrate process improvement over time in a fact-based, visual way.

"Simple systems, great results!"

"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

Think of the money that could be saved if each person in your company knew which processes they owned. How much value could be added if these people were given the tools and support to make sure that regular process improvement could occur? Would morale improve if meetings and training were more effective? Would a sense of ownership and pride grow over time if each manager set a personal example through personal process improvement?

Making the switch to a process kaizen orientation is not hard. However, it does involve learning to think differently. More importantly, such a change involves admitting that we all do repetitive tasks as we perform our daily work. We should all be held accountable for the results that these processes produce with each cycle. Most importantly, we must make sure that we continue to make each key process better as the days go by.

How Do You Define Your Key Work Processes?

The process definition blueprint shown here is an example of one commonly found in a Baldrige application for an organization's value creation processes. There are two key things to note about this example.

First, look at the types of process areas in the left column list. Many workplaces neglect some of these processes from a process management perspective.

They just let them run their cycles each day. Little worry is given to potential process waste or process improvement possibilities that may exist.

Example Process Definition Matrix

More importantly, look at the columns that exist for each process area. For each of the six processes shown, key customer requirements have been defined. Process measures exist as well. This is where both the simplicity and power of process management exists. If all work is a process, how many processes do you have in your organization?

"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

How Many Processes are in Your Process Kaizen Work System?

Flow charts are a primary tool people use to define the value added and non-value added steps in a given process.

Value stream maps build on the design of this quality tool. You may have used one, or both, tools at one time or another to define your processes.

Have you also gone the extra mile to identify what the desired processes should look like? How often do you track the waste, or non-value

Support Process Definition Blueprint

Key Support Process Area	Key Customer Requirements	Key Processes and Tools	Key Process Measure(s)
Accounting	Timely information Accurate information Minimize process costs	Month-end closing Receivables collection Billing and payroll	Monthly close cycle time # of days outstanding Process cost per pound
Human Resources	Quality employees Trained employees Value added benefits	Hiring process Training plan and delivery Benefits administration	Employee survey score Training index results Retention, absenteeism rates
Leadership	Effective strategies and plans Daily decision quality Process effectiveness	Performance reviews Planning sessions Workgroup meetings	Leadership Index Scorecard results Process cost per pound
Information Systems	Timely information Accurate information Reliable, friendly systems	Performance reports Intranet / Internet PC applications	System uptime % # of user needs resolved Employee survey score
Quality Assurance	Timely feedback Quality training Accurate process monitoring	Defect tracking Complaint reduction process Quality Improvement teams	Defect rates # of customer complaints Employee survey score
Maintenance	Timely repairs Preventive maintenance Improvement projects	Downtime database, reports Scheduling process Project database	Equipment uptime % # of downtime incidents # of improvements made
Sanitation	Clean equipment and plant Food safety compliance Minimize waste streams	Master Cleaning Schedule Internal audits Recycling program	Daily pre-op scores Audit scores % waste recycled

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added, steps that exist in each process? How often do you effectively find the root causes of that waste?

Too few organizations go beyond process map creation to define all the key processes in their organization. Even fewer define the customer requirements and measures for each process. This blueprint is central to the process definition efforts of the best companies.

Take the time as a leadership team to complete a similar table for your location. You might come across some process definition gaps. Also, you might gain some clarity about why you do what you do each day.

The **Baldrige Performance Excellence criteria** focus on two key process types - value creation and support. Value creation processes exist to build value into the product or service that you provide to your customers. Support processes help make sure that the value creation processes can do their job.

We tend to focus on value creation processes because they are central to the supply chain itself. However, we shouldn't ignore the support processes. If support processes contain waste or fail to meet their requirements, the value creation processes eventually break down as well. Even if the value creation processes don't fail, they will cost much more to execute than they should.

Where Do You Measure Process Performance?

Imagine if you simply took the time to complete such a chart for your location (at most an hour or two of your leadership team's time). How much clarity might you gain about why your people currently do what they do on the job each day?

I would bet that you would find a gap or two. For example, you might discover a lack of defined internal or external customer requirements. Also, you might detect a lack of measures to gauge requirement compliance success.

Don't forget that you can create a similar chart for each of your support processes. How effective are your human resources, information technology, and maintenance processes? How many support processes do you have? Do you think you might find some waste and process insight in those areas?

Would You Like to Measure and Improve Your Process Kaizen Work System?

For over 40 years, I have helped set up and manage process improvement work systems in many different companies in a variety of business arenas. This experience continues to help me design value added, simple ways to set up process kaizen work systems.

I know how to create balanced scorecards that better measure process performance. I have found best practice ways to really tell a company's improvement story.

Improving Your Process Improvement Work System

Here are ten key ways to create an effective process improvement work system:

- Identify all key processes in your organization by department
- Identify 3-5 key customer requirements for each process
- Define 3-5 key metrics for each key process – safety, quality, people, cost
- Create a current flow chart for each key process
- Know your waste streams, their costs, and ways to minimize or eliminate them
- Define one or more projects for minimizing each waste stream
- Require process leaders to trend the DAILY performance of their key processes
- Reduce process variation and improve capability through process redesign
- Identify internal and external benchmarks for each key process measure
- Hold regular process team meetings to review performance, plan, and share ideas

Most importantly, I have learned how to help each process owner better understand what makes their systems tick. Failing to define and eliminate process waste streams is the primary power restrictor for this power system. These tools help you both eliminate that barrier and move forward more rapidly towards higher levels of performance.

If you have interest in the process improvement work system tools that I offer, send me an e-mail at **kevin@greatsystems.com**.

About the author

As Chief Excellence Officer of Great Systems LLC, Kevin McManus provides virtual coaching and content to help people use proven best practices to enhance and optimize their daily work systems.

Over forty years of work experience in roles such as Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality give Kevin a 'real life work' perspective relative to daily work process optimization, work team engagement and empowerment, and sustainable operational excellence.

As a contract trainer for the TapRooT® root cause analysis process, Kevin has taught over 450 courses and further enhanced his ability to help leaders proactively minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve reliability. Kevin holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. He served as a national Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Award Examiner for twenty years, including a three-year term on the national Judge's Panel.

Kevin has authored the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial and Systems Engineer magazine for over 20 years, is an Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineering Fellow and has been a member of IISE for over forty years. His newest book, "Different Company – How the Best Build Great Organizations", will be published in late 2025."

If you would like more information about the improvement tools and systems I have to offer, please send me an e-mail at **kevin@greatsystems.com.**

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More Great Improvement Books by Kevin McManus!

Pursuing Process Excellence

- 150 pages of ideas and examples that will help you accelerate and sustain your process improvement efforts
- Over 25 examples of 'best practice' assessment tools that leaders can use to encourage and support high performance work
- 12 team exercises that can be used to begin applying each concept as it is learned

Vital Signs Measurement

- 128 pages of ideas and examples to help you make your existing measurement systems more meaningful
- Over 30 examples of 'best practice' measurement tools and techniques that leaders can use to promote high performance work
- 14 team exercises that can be used to begin applying key concepts as they are learned

Error Proof

- 162 pages of strategies and dialogue questions to help you stop daily goofs for good
- Over 100 proven best practices that you can use to help error proof your key work processes
- Can be paired with the 100 page workshop workbook that contains 13 team exercises to help you begin applying key ideas

Facilitating and Leading Teams

- 182 pages of ideas, tools, and examples to help you improve work team, project team, and focus team effectiveness
- 10 assessments that will help you identify areas of strength and weakness relative to work and project team support
- Over 20 team exercises that will help you optimize your use of teams and improve meeting effectiveness, while also practicing your facilitation skills

How to Develop a High Performance Work Culture

- 162 pages of ideas and examples to help you begin changing your existing work systems so that they are less likely to hold back your culture change and performance improvement efforts
- Over 30 examples of tools ad techniques that are used by high performance organizations to help shape their work cultures
- 14 team exercises to help you create work systems that support and encourage a high performance work culture

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