

The manufacturing sector has had the benefit of developing and improving processes for a long time. Ideas and inputs into the process improvement business have proliferated over time. Along with that, technological improvements have allowed for major gains to be achieved. So where do we look or go for improvements now?

Economic conditions, competition and workforce availability all impact the manufacturing sector as leaders search for ways to increase efficiency and production levels, reduce costs and improve the bottom line.

The 2016 Olympics are upon us. When athletes begin their careers, performance levels are low. They train and follow coaches' guidelines and performances improve significantly. But the better they get, the more difficult it becomes to achieve any additional improvement. Improvement rates slow down and it takes much more input to gain any advantage.

The manufacturing sector is like a well-trained athlete. There were major improvements in the early years but it is becoming increasingly difficult to make additional gains. So what do we do? Where do we go from here?

The business literature is replete with examples of organisations that failed to look at their business differently from the way they started, to redefine the business they were in. Because of that, they continually focused on

trying to address "the wrong problem". Today, Kodak is a faded replica of what it used to be. The companies that continue to succeed are the ones that revisit who and what they are, looking at themselves differently and reinventing themselves.

This is a mental and attitudinal activity. It involves letting go of old constructs (even for a moment) and welcoming new perspectives, standing in a new place, looking with new eyes. Essentially, it is a process of redefinition or relabeling.

Redefinition (relabeling) can allow manufacturers to ask different questions. These new questions come from a place of not knowing and being naïve. It requires that we distance ourselves from our many years of experience and collective expertise. Different questions generate new and revealing answers. And it is new answers that we want. It allows those involved in addressing the challenge to see things from a different perspective. New perspectives surface new approaches and answers.

Redefinition (relabeling) also takes us into the realm of thought. Most of the time, we "think" in words but the process is reciprocal. Our words also guide and influence our thoughts, and by extension, our emotions. Is a difficulty that we face in the manufacturing process a "problem", an "obstacle", a "challenge" or an "opportunity"? Depending on how we label it, different approaches will suggest themselves and different solutions and improvements will emerge.

Far removed from manufacturing is the world of metaphor, or is it that far removed? Just to name a few, we speak of bottlenecks, process flow and lean thinking or lean manufacturing. Not one of these references originated in manufacturing but they have all brought some value to business processes. The financial sector is replete with "water metaphors" – cash flow, liquidity, float a loan, slush fund, swimming in money, draining resources, frozen assets, launder money, pumping money.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between dissimilar things. It is important to note that metaphors are not logical so they take us on a refreshing journey of new directions and unexpected discovery. Most importantly, metaphors get us to see parallels and then to ask questions. It is the questions about what we do and how we do it that bring the value. The danger would be to take parallels and apply them directly to business processes.

If our metaphors get us to ask questions like "how do we avoid bumping into things in the dark?", "how might we cut through this problem?", "how might we reduce the bottlenecks?" or "how might we untie this knot", we are likely to discover revealing answers and possibilities for our business processes.

Because we are "experts" and experienced in our field, we "know the answers". Our neural pathways take us along familiar superhighways to traditional solutions,

RENOVATE? RECONSTRUCT? OR BOTH?

leaving many opportunities undiscovered. Metaphors jump-start our engines to take us in new directions. Metaphors ignite a fire inside us to discover ways of fast-tracking business process solutions. Notice the images, emotions and power that accompany the metaphorical use of the words “jump-start” and “ignite”. That is the power that you can bring to the task of improving business processes.

This exploration of new directions in Business Process Optimisation has taken us not to the technology or the mechanics, not to the numbers or the sequencing but on an inner journey to the potentially unlimited source of ideas, unleashed by language and metaphor.

The journey continues toward a methodology based on a platform of diversity and given power by questioning, reflection and action. Our business processes are used by many and they impact many more. Everyone has some connection with your business processes – suppliers, receivers, users, those in support roles, customers, competitors, financiers ... everyone. And they all have questions and ideas about your processes. Why not tap into this massive interested and connected resource?

Complex issues can be successfully addressed by a diverse group of people who commit to questioning, reflection and action in pursuit of solving significant problems. A simple and powerful available methodology is Action Learning.

This process taps into the power of the differences that people bring to an issue. The rich diversity opens up ideas and possibilities for all. From a creative perspective, this is vastly superior to individual expertise. Arising from a desire to know, the process of asking great questions unearths insights and options. Curiosity and exploration are the keys to going into the unknown and identifying possibilities. The reflection dimension expands mental landscapes and openness to what is new and what has changed for the individual and for the organisation. The action dimension ensures that things happen, that people “do”. In all of this, people learn and grow while the organisation discovers and develops innovative solutions to real business problems. The group setting enhances teamwork and organisational commitment.

Leaders can best advance Business Process Optimisation not when they initially focus on renovating or reconstructing the processes but when they renovate minds through redefinition (relabeling) and by the use of metaphor and when they take the bold step to reconstruct the people configurations into Action Learning Groups to address process issues.

The mandate for the future is renovate and reconstruct.

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Published: TTMA Manufacturers' Digest 2016