

## **It's about priorities, not time.**

April 2014 Newsletter

The CEO of a firm I visited recently lamented that his team didn't have time for process improvement work. He said that the company already runs very lean, people were already working long hours, and he felt awkward asking them to commit more time at the office.

"I don't have time" is a complaint you hear often, but that's really not true. What we really ought to say is, "It's just not a priority for me." You always have time for what's important. At the risk of being melodramatic, if your husband or child were taken to the hospital after a serious accident, I bet you'd find time to sit by their bedside. Because that's way more important than finishing up the PowerPoint for tomorrow's marketing meeting.

Even in far less dramatic conditions, people find the time to do what's important to them. Ron Ashkenas described this situation in a Harvard Business Review [article](#):

You receive a phone call from the president of your company. He asks whether you'd be interested in taking on a special assignment. . . . In this assignment you would report directly to him, and you would participate in making some of the important strategic decisions facing the company. The job would also involve some interesting travel. . . and provide you with major growth opportunities.

The offer has only one catch: because the assignment is part time, requiring about a day a week, you would have to do your present job in the remaining four days. Would you take the assignment?

We have posed this hypothetical question to hundreds of managers, most of whom believed that they already lacked the time to do their jobs properly. Ninety-nine percent of them take the assignment. By doing so, these managers are in effect admitting that, if the motivation were powerful enough, they could eliminate or do in much less time eight to ten hours' worth of activities each week without negative consequences.

Barring any sudden religious conversion about the importance of committing time to operational improvement, what can you do to increase the likelihood that you or your team will start to make time for this essential activity? Here are a few ideas to lower the hurdle to starting:

### **Level the load**

Rather than trying to block out one or two solid hours of improvement work (which, let's face it, is daunting) try doing 15 minutes per day four days per week. That's an hour per week, and 50 hours per year—not a bad amount of improvement time. Moving tools to point of use,

organizing supplies and information, mapping a process a step at a time—you'd be surprised at how much you can accomplish in just 15 minutes.

### **Reverse Parkinson's Law**

Parkinson's Law states that work expands to fill the time available for completion. As in Ron Ashkenas' thought experiment above, people are able to compress the time needed for their work if there's something else they want to get done. If you hard code one hour of improvement work per week, people will figure out how to accommodate that additional demand on their time. ("Oh, right: today we're doing kaizen at 4pm. I've got to wrap up early.") After all, I've never seen people have problems finishing up early for a Friday afternoon barbecue.

### **The Logical Approach**

Let's be honest: there's plenty of non-value added work in your daily jobs. There's rework of errors, clarification of ambiguous requests, flaccid meetings that go on way too long, and all kinds of fire-fighting that suck up time you'd rather spend on other things. Of course, people seldom make the effort to actually calculate how much time is wasted on this sort of nonsense. However, actually doing so is eye-opening, and when people realize just how much of their week is low- or no-value work, it's easier to motivate them to find time for improvement.

You cannot innovate if you don't have time, and you won't have time if you don't improve the way your company operates. Toyota, one of the most successful companies in modern times, has demonstrated incontrovertibly that consistently engaging in improvement activities produces extraordinary results. Make kaizen a priority. And if you're struggling to make it a priority, these three approaches may at least make it easier to find time.

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