

IMPROVEMENT SKILLS CONSULTING LTD.

“Simply, improvement...”



Corrective Action: Addressing Root Causes

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“I know exactly what the problem is; we’ve fixed it five times over the past year”. [Anon]

We’ve got a problem...

Clearly, the manager who uttered the above quote did not understand what it means to solve a problem. Their five fixes may have tackled some of its symptoms, but they definitely didn’t address its root cause. True corrective action means identifying and implementing viable solutions that permanently remove root causes.

For many organisations, root cause problem solving (RCPS) is a forgotten skill. It should be a core skill for line managers and front-line staff who need to:

-  Get projects back on track, when things go wrong
-  Sort out performance and quality issues with day-to-day processes

You know you need to be better at RCPS when you:

-  Keep finding the same mistakes and errors occur (you’re not learning from the past)
-  Have regular complaints about products or services from customers and other stakeholders
-  Never quite know why things go wrong (problems are often “a surprise”)
-  Fix things, but never get to the root of the problem (you’re not sure if they’ll come back and “bite you” again later)

We define a problem as “*a deviation from expected or desired performance*”, which could mean you’re not hitting targets, missing deadlines, failing to comply with required standards, or simply, there’s an improvement opportunity.

Any such “deviation” can be addressed by RCPS, combining a systematic approach with the knowledge and creative skills of staff. Without RCPS, the danger is that you:

- Leap to immediate actions based on an assumption that it's best to try something; perpetuating the myth that managers are paid to take action (not to think)
- Speculate about the cause ("I know the answer..."), quickly followed by ineffective actions
- Implement a "quick fix"; apply a band-aid solution which then becomes permanent when you move on to deal with the next issue
- Ignore, or mis-interpret, the available information; a case of "don't confuse me with the facts"

An approach to RCPS

We recommend the DMAIC approach which many people will be familiar with as a process improvement methodology. With some minor adaptation it fits the bill for problem solving:

- **Define** the problem and the criteria for successful improvement (and implement any "quick fixes", if necessary)
- **Measure** the problem, by gathering both quantitative and qualitative information
- **Analyse** the information about the problem to understand and determine its root cause(s)
- **Improve**, by developing workable solutions, plans for their implementation and actually implementing those improvement ideas
- **Control** and stabilise the solution to ensure the root cause has been eliminated, before celebrating success and learning for the future

Note that it is perfectly valid to implement "quick fixes"; they are often needed to stop the immediate pain being caused by the problem. But, don't stop there; they have not addressed the root cause(s) of the problem; they only buy you time.

Corrective Action Process

Define

- Define the Problem (what it IS and IS NOT)
- Implement “quick fixes”, if necessary
- Identify all the possible causes of the problem



Measure

- Agree what information and data are needed to understand the problem
- Identify how the information and data will be collected
- Collect the information and data



Analyse

- Analyse the problem using the quantitative data and qualitative information
- Assess the most likely causes of the problem
- Identify the root cause(s) of the problem



Improve

- Identify, select and test possible solutions (pilot, if necessary)
- Develop plans to implement the selected improvements
- Implement the solution(s)



Control

- Assess performance with the solution(s) in place
- Ensure the required performance can be sustained
- Review what was done and apply learning for the future

Problem Solving Tools and Techniques

We've suggested above that RCPS requires a systematic approach, combined with the creative skills of staff who can contribute to solving a problem.

Not only do they need to be able to use the RCPS approach, but also apply many of the well-known and proven appropriate tools and techniques that are available:

RCPS Stage	Tools and Techniques
Define	Problem Definition Questions Brainstorming Process Flowcharts
Measure	Check-sheets/Tally-sheets Concentration Diagrams Interviews and Questionnaires
Analyse	Cause & Effect Analysis (Fishbone Diagrams) The Five Whys Data Display Graphs and Charts – Line Graphs, Histograms, Bar Charts Pareto Analysis
Improve	Brainstorming Process Flow Charts Ranking and Rating Risk Analysis Force Field Analysis
Control	Data Display Graphs and Charts Statistical Process Control (SPC) Charts

Many of these will be familiar, particularly if you are implementing Lean or Six Sigma programmes, but they may not be applied systematically whenever corrective action is required. They are not hard to learn and because many are team-based, they are a great way to ensure staff buy-in and to enable people to contribute to solving problems. Readers familiar with Lean Principles will recognise the use of the RCPS process and tools in daily meetings and as part of “visual management”.

Perhaps the most important tool is the Problem Definition Questions: a simple way to specify what it is you need to solve. By asking “what, where, when, who and how big” we can begin to define a problem and its impact. It’s often also useful to ask questions about what the problem isn’t, where it isn’t, who’s not affected and when it doesn’t occur. These “*is not*” questions help define the boundaries, or scope, of the problem and may also lead you to root causes and potential solutions.

All the other tools are applied, as appropriate, after you have defined the problem and, in most cases, a range of tools will be needed. Remember, “if the only tool you have is a hammer, pretty soon, every problem starts to look like a nail”. Which means it’s highly unlikely that “good old Brainstorming” (or whatever is your favourite) is likely to be adequate, on its own.

Learning to solve problems

None of this is difficult to learn; it’s just that it seems very few organisations include it in their sets of core skills for managers and staff. Those who are well-established in applying continuous improvement will have embedded such skill development into their induction and other development programmes. Many will also have developed internal coaches or facilitators to be able to work with other staff, using these approaches.

Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to manage and improve performance for nearly two decades. We are not wedded to a particular methodology. We have delivered numerous bespoke programmes designed to give staff the knowledge and skills to implement effective Corrective Action using the Root Cause Problem Solving approach and tools.

We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to develop Root Cause Problem Solving Skills.

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