

Fear in the Workplace – A “Deal-Breaker” for Improvement Initiatives and Culture Change

by Kay Sever, Continuous Improvement Coach and Consultant, CQIA

I Meet Fear Everywhere I Go

You may wonder why fear would be a topic for an article on continuous improvement. Usually such articles are written about tools for improvement or implementation strategies. As a consultant who works with every organizational level, **I meet fear everywhere I go**. It negatively impacts my ability to help clients achieve new levels of operational and financial performance, and it limits my clients' ability to maximize the benefits that their continuous improvement (CI) program is capable of delivering. ***Fear is a very real barrier to improvement.***

Your response to all of this may be “Kay, everyone knows that people are afraid of change.” You are right. The fear of change:

- is a commonly shared fear that is experienced both at work and at home. It is not driven by a corporate culture.
- is often caused by a fear of the unknown. Once the unknown becomes known, the fear of change dissipates.
- temporarily hinders continuous improvement until people learn about a tool or practice that makes their job easier, gives them better information for decision-making, or helps them eliminate recurring problems. When employees develop a vision of their future and understand the benefits of new tools or practices, the fear of change is often replaced with a desire to change.

But fear of change is NOT what this article is about...

Do any of these events sound familiar?

- 1) Employees budget “what management wants to see” instead of what is achievable or achievable with stretch.
- 2) Engineers are afraid to reveal errors discovered in long-range planning models.
- 3) Costs are capitalized that should be expensed in order to meet budget.
- 4) A recurring equipment problem on night shift was not repaired when minimal downtime could have resolved the issue. The problem was not reported to day shift before start-up, causing a major breakdown and significant production losses that could have been avoided.
- 5) Engineering and the financial department “build” the budget without consulting operations or maintenance.
- 6) Employees are held accountable for achieving a budget that they never see.
- 7) Planned maintenance is “skipped or postponed” to achieve production goals.

If you answered “yes” to one or more of these, you have experienced the **challenges of meeting performance expectations in a culture that is not able to focus 100% on achieving performance goals**. Let's think about that for a minute...

If a workforce has the resources and technical training needed to run day-to-day operations, why would it NOT be able to **focus** on achieving those goals? The key word here is FOCUS.

To answer this question, let's start with the kinds of problems that distract the mind in our personal lives. If we took 5 minutes to write down the distractions that throw us off course in our daily lives, the list would probably contain things like:

- a family illness
- worry over a job loss (yours or another family member)
- conflict between family members
- broken promises
- expectations that were not met (example: poor work from a company doing repairs in your home)
- perceived lack of respect from family or friends.

This list might also contain a flat tire, dead battery or an auto accident – unplanned events and surprises that are usually temporary problems.

If we made a similar list for the workplace, it might contain things like:

- worry over a job loss or reorganization
- conflict between co-workers
- broken commitments from co-workers, suppliers or management
- expectations that were not met (example: poor work from a contractor)
- uncertainty about the impact of budget shortfalls
- conflict between departments or employees
- perceived lack of respect from management or co-workers.

This list might also contain recurring problems, process failures, equipment breakdowns and accidents – unplanned events and surprises that are usually temporary problems.

Notice the similarity between the problems that distract us in our personal and professional lives. Most of them result from negative behaviors that steal from productive work, lower morale, and shape our paradigms about what is possible to change - hence, the connection to continuous improvement and culture change.

Fear, Corporate Culture and Success with Continuous Improvement

Attributes of a corporate culture include:

- the way departments communicate
- how well employees work together
- how employees are motivated
- morale
- how much the company cares about its employees
- how much management shares about what is going on in the company
- the achievability of business objectives
- how management defines opportunity
- the freedom to speak about what needs to be fixed

Workplace fears can sabotage how well a company executes these attributes. The sabotage can be so subtle and gradual that it becomes part of “the way we work”, can go unnoticed for years and survives changes in management and reorganizations.

Each of the seven events listed on page 1 is caused by a failure in the planning process or the communication process combined with a fear of:

- production shortfalls

- repercussions if management finds out
- losing control or losing power
- consequences of disagreeing with management, or
- employees becoming knowledgeable about the business.

The degree to which a workforce harbors these fears forms much of its culture. Ironically, the culture reciprocates and sustains the fears, sometimes a tough cycle to recognize and break. If you have been involved in implementing improvement initiatives in a workplace filled with these fears, you probably **achieved limited success with your improvement initiative, and the problems driven by these fears probably continued to occur after implementation was complete.**

Management teams often think that continuous improvement programs alone will deliver culture change by helping employees find and eliminate process inefficiencies that are driving behaviors within and between departments. They are right about one thing - continuous improvement initiatives will improve process efficiencies; however, the expected culture change may not occur because the management system was not part of the implementation scope and was not “synced up” to continuous improvement tools and learnings. Examples include:

- Departmental “touchpoints” to a production or administrative process that are broken or ineffective, leading to poor communications, a lack of understanding of customer requirements and little desire to please the customer.
- Individuals with authority over processes who do not understand their role in facilitating change.
- Management directives related to management system processes (budgeting/forecasting, capital approval, incentive program, workforce communications, etc.) that suppress improvement efforts or contradict process capability and key measures as defined in the continuous improvement program.
- Management’s response to breakdowns or “surprises”.

Create a “Comfort Zone” to Initiate Fear Removal

To change corporate culture, the fears that shape it must be alleviated. How do we begin this work? We create a “comfort zone” for the management team and workforce that allows everyone to speak freely about problems without being judged. This “zone” can only be created and sustained by management, and is initiated through a series of processes that allows the management team to step away from the “touchy-feely” and objectively examine the management system and how it is executed. This work may be management’s first career opportunity to be “players” instead of “spectators” in continuous improvement work. It is the only place to begin to insure sustainability of improvements and true culture change.

NOTE: Kay Sever implements continuous improvement with a unique and balanced approach between continuous improvement concepts/tools and the people side of improvement. She works with every organizational level and across functional areas to 1) remove the barriers that hide opportunity and prevent sustainability and culture change, and 2) promote cooperation and measurable improvement in all departments to maximize the natural synergies that exist between production and all the departments that support it. She also coaches management teams on Improvement Leadership and helps them modify their management processes to drive and sustain process improvements and improvement initiatives. More detail about her services is available at her website: miningoportunity.com. She resides in Arizona and can be reached at 480-545-9095 or via email: kay@miningoportunity.com.