Flawless Execution: Bridging the Continuous Improvement Gap

Created in the 1980s by Motorola and popularized in the '90s at GE, Six Sigma has been shown to improve processes and reduce error rates, but does it still stand up to today's fast-paced, hostile business environment? In comparison, Flawless Execution, a continuous improvement process perfected over many years from fighter pilot training principles, may be a simpler yet more effective business performance model.

In the past two decades, thousands of companies have implemented continuous improvement (CI) methodologies in an effort to eliminate waste, reduce response time, simplify the design of both products and processes, and improve quality and customer service. The primary objectives of these programs are to reduce operating costs, improve customer satisfaction (increase revenue), and drive a cultural change. Aside from the growing popularity of Flawless Execution, the most common continuous improvement initiatives utilize Lean, Six Sigma, or a combination of each.

Lean and Six Sigma are great tools when used appropriately but, by themselves, are not the ‘magic’ bullet that many companies hope will drive cost out of their organizations and decrease inefficiencies. There are some significant gaps that must be filled in order to facilitate and amplify the success of these and other continuous improvement initiatives. Four of these gaps are (1) poor alignment with the organization’s strategy, (2) overutilization, (3) difficulty in changing culture, and (4) absence of an execution process. These four gaps will be addressed, and we will explore a methodology that can help bridge them: Flawless Execution.

Continuous Improvement Methods That Encourage Development

Continuous Improvement methodologies are generally tactical tools used to improve a particular process. A team can significantly reduce the cycle time of a process or cut its defects in half and consider the project successful. Though successful, sometimes these projects fail to move the needle of the organization in the right direction. They either fail to show up on the profit and loss statement or do not significantly contribute toward driving the corporation to its strategic future.

There are components in the Define phase of Six Sigma that seek to align a project with the customer or organization's CTQ's (Critical to Quality). Tools such as QFDs (Quality Functional Deployment) and CTQ drilldowns are often used for that purpose. In either case, there is rarely a standard methodology used to ensure that the continuous improvement team is working on projects that will help the organization reach its Future Picture.

Developing a Future Picture of Business Goals

Flawless Execution is an organizational development and improvement model derived from proven methodologies used by elite military forces. In business, the model is used to transform strategy into action. It provides the framework for the development of an adaptive strategy, the creation of relevant projects/missions, and a battle rhythm that drives the organization toward a Future Picture.

Utilizing effects based strategy development and the military concepts of Open Planning and Systems Analysis, Flawless Execution works from the Future backwards to determine the right projects to tackle. The Flawless Execution model utilizes a methodical, practical, and metrics-driven approach to develop the Future Picture of the organization. This Future Picture is what the company will look like in 2-3 years in 12 areas ranging from finance to corporate culture.

After the Future Picture is established, the FLEX model requires that the team determine the key Centers of Gravity for both the Internal and External Systems. These Centers of Gravity are leverage points that when effort is applied to them give the biggest return on investment and significantly alter the system to the proposed future state. Projects are developed to affect these Centers of Gravity. As a result, there is a direct line of sight between where the company wants to be in the Future and the projects/missions that it needs to complete to get there. The process is practical and scalable and can be implemented at the corporate level, in smaller business units, and in small teams.

Once an organization has determined the processes that need to be improved or projects that should be executed, the next question to answer is which tool should be used. A company armed with continuous improvement resources has at its disposal a team with a myriad of tools to solve a variety of problems. Six Sigma and Lean are comprised of a collection of tools that can be utilized for various jobs. Some projects require 90% of the tools while others may only require 25%. This is the beauty and also the drawback of these methodologies. This creates several problems in an organization.

As a whole, both Lean and Six Sigma could be creatively used to tackle most processes or projects. Some projects or process improvements don't require statistical analysis or a team of individuals and continuous improvement experts five weeks, including pre-work to complete. In these cases, the organization simply needs knowledgeable individuals using a structured process to brainstorm and implement solutions in a day or two. Though
Six Sigma and Lean could be used; they are significantly underutilized in these instances. Flawless Execution fills this gap.

The Usefulness of Flawless Execution in All Projects

The engine of the Flawless Execution model is the Plan-Brief-Execute-Debrief cycle. This cycle is currently used by elite military officers to improve performance in the zero-tolerance-for-error world of combat. The model is scalable and relatively easy to understand and implement. The Flawless Execution cycle is perfectly suited for those low hanging projects in areas where Lean and Six Sigma may be too robust.

The Planning segment of the cycle incorporates six basic steps to develop a quick, workable plan. The first step is developing a clear, measurable, and achievable objective. Next, the team brainstorms threats to accomplishing that objective and resources that can be used to achieve it. Lessons Learned from similar projects are also considered. The team then utilizes a unique process to develop an action plan with specific accountability. This process utilizes 'out of the box' brainstorming in conjunction with outside criticism to develop a fully functional plan in a short time period. Finally, a contingency plan is developed to handle the uncontrollable external threats to the mission that may arise.

The end result of the "Plan" component is the development of a course of action to either execute projects or improve processes with minimal data requirements. The "Briefing" component ensures that the plan is adequately communicated to the team. The "Execute" segment provides tools to remove the primary barrier to mission accomplishment in today's demanding workplace, Task Saturation, which is defined as the perception or reality of having too much to do without enough time, tools, and resources to accomplish the mission.

The last segment of the Flawless Execution model is the "Debrief." This phase completely differentiates the Flawless Execution Model from other continuous improvement processes. At the completion of the project, the team debriefs the actions that took place during execution. Debrief analyzes the root causes for the major project successes and failures. The Lessons Learned cycle back into the "Plan" step in future missions in order to continually improve.

In contrast, the tools/concepts introduced by the Six Sigma and Lean continuous improvement initiatives generally require that a separate team of individuals drive these improvements. The continuous improvement team and infrastructure can generally be very costly. The presence of these continuous improvement teams also gives the perception that the tools are too complicated to be utilized effectively by the individual. As a result, individuals are trained extensively in 2-3 week certification courses, which add to the costs of the projects.

Closing in on the Gap

Many projects fail because the solutions were identified but not effectively implemented. Some solutions are complicated enough that some standard process should be applied for implementation. Flawless Execution, by its very nature, provides a framework that increases the chances that the solutions will be implemented with minimum error. It adds rigor and discipline of thought to the execution of continuous improvement solutions.

The simple, execution-focused approach of the Flawless Execution model can shore up some of the gaps in existing continuous improvement programs as well as serve as the foundation for improvements in others. Its versatility and scalability are also powerful characteristics. Flawless Execution is quick to produce results and useful in virtually every process and its toolkit can prove to be an invaluable asset to any Continuous Improvement Initiative.

About the Author

James D. Murphy, the founder and CEO of Afterburner, Inc., has a unique, powerful mix of leadership skills in both the military and business worlds. After graduating from the University of Kentucky, Murphy joined the U.S. Air Force where he learned to fly the F-15. He has logged over 1,200 hours as an instructor pilot in the F-15 and has accumulated over 3,200 hours of flight time in other high-performance jet aircraft. Murphy, Afterburner's leadership keynote speaker, has helped top business leaders transform strategy into action, demonstrating how the concepts of the Flawless Execution(SM) model could be applied to business process improvement and engaging the proven model - "Plan. Brief. Execute. Debrief." Through his leadership, Afterburner has landed on Inc. Magazine's "Inc. 500 List" twice. Murphy has been featured in a variety of prestigious publications and has appeared on CNN, Fox News, and Bloomberg News to name a few. For more information on Afterburner, Inc., please visit afterburner.com.

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