



MANAGEMENT CONNECTION

THE ART OF DISCONTENTMENT

NEVER LEAVE WELL
ENOUGH ALONE

BY R. ANDREW BRAUN, CDM, CFPP

PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD THE SAYING “*Good is the enemy of great.*” While catchy and thought-provoking, I think what we mean to say is that *good enough* is the enemy of great. If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.

Why are we so content to muddle along with a so-so status quo that prevents us from reaching our full potential? In managing foodservice operations as in life, good enough is just easier. It requires the minimum commitment, least effort, no additional time, and who could blame you when everything is going “OK”?

But there is a dark side to good enough. Problems will inevitably arise, and you will be reacting like a first responder at the scene of an accident, trying to mitigate the damage already done. Processes that are just “good enough” leave time, resources, and money on the table that could’ve been better deployed elsewhere. Good enough ignores our most valued assets—our people—in the blind certainty that we directors know best.

Getting out of this mindset requires a philosophical shift from “Meh... it’s fine” to never settling, never being completely content. This shift doesn’t stand still when progress is possible but seeks *Continuous Improvement*. It takes commitment from not only management, but also *employees at every level of the operation*, and it’s worth the effort, resulting in better employee engagement, safer environments, tighter budgets, and less waste.

This is not a new idea; the philosophy of Continuous Improvement has been demonstrating outstanding results for 75 years, but it may be new to you. Read on to learn more.

WHAT IS THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROCESS?

Continuous improvement is what happens when you apply the scientific method of theorizing, experimenting, and testing the results to an operation. Originally developed for manufacturing operations during WWII, the focus was on fixing problems as they occurred, within a day of discovering them. These small improvements in procedures led to big positive changes over time. This was hugely important as there was a shortage of time, money, and personnel due to the war effort.

These principles were refined somewhat over the next few years, and it is here in the 1950s where the continuous improvement process (CIP) really hit its stride. CIP hinged

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on the idea that positive changes could be suggested not by managers from behind a desk, but by the people most familiar with the processes—the ones doing the work. It wasn't long before the less-obvious benefits became apparent. Not only were there fewer problems popping up, but operations improved in other ways too. Employee engagement and ownership of the quality and quantity of their work increased drastically. This is a natural response: people will feel more pride for the processes that they help to design. Everyone feels heard and becomes more aware of their importance to the grand scheme of things, from the night shift janitor to the CEO.

In post-war Japan, continuous improvement was taught to business leaders as part of the effort to rebuild the country and is called *Kaizan* (improvement or “good change”). These ideas helped foster an economic miracle. Japan, a tiny island that was virtually destroyed, depopulated, had no natural resources, and a prior reputation for poor quality goods, became the second largest economy in the world in less than 30 years. The quality of Japanese goods became so much better than their American counterparts that a Congressional Trade Subcommittee was formed in 1979 to understand why we were being outperformed to a degree that the American way of life was threatened.

One of the findings in the report was that every member of the company is interested in the best quality, and improvements came from the bottom up, not the top down. The report found that Japanese workers made far more suggestions for improvement than their American counterparts, and that management implemented a staggering



“COMPLACENCY IS THE
LAST HURDLE
standing between any team
and its potential greatness.”

—Pat Riley

80-90 percent of their suggestions and rewarded them. Toyota Motor Company and Texas Instruments were both early adopters of a CIP. Soon other corporations would follow—Ford Motor Company, Lockheed Martin, Nestlé, and the Mayo Clinic, to name a few.

BREAKING IT DOWN

The concept of CIP has been around a long time, but perhaps you haven't associated it with foodservice operations before. It can be very structured and formalized, with events daily, weekly, or monthly, or it can simply be a part of the workplace culture—encouraged but not required. At its heart, it is throwing out the assumption that the CEO and department heads know the best course of action.

Every process or policy is created with limited information and will not be perfect. Each time we perform a task, we are creating more useful data that can be used to improve. We just aren't paying attention to the results.

Have you ever experienced a big rollout, rebranding, or major policy shift that failed miserably? Many initiatives that come prepackaged from upper management quietly go away over time, usually after a big fanfare at launch. It is difficult to get an entire organization to buy into changes when they have no ownership. Changes that are forced on us (especially the ones where we can see all the ways they will go wrong from a mile away) are frustrating. When these changes are introduced with no follow-up to see if they even worked, employee frustration mounts, leading to higher turnover and lower employee morale.

The culture of continuous improvement is built on employees buying in. CIP doesn't seek huge changes, rollouts or fanfare, and included in the concept is the need to *verify that any changes made are achieving the desired result.* One of the things that makes it so valuable to an organization can also make it difficult to stick to. Changes can be small, gradual, and may lack any immediate, obvious, earth-shattering impact that managers want to see for their efforts. More tortoise than hare, these incremental changes are much safer and easier in the short run and will have a lasting impact over time. If you are looking to make a splash and change everything at once, or you are a “swing for the fences” type, just remember that the batters with the most homeruns inevitably have the most strike outs (except Lou Gehrig apparently).

HOW TO IMPLEMENT A CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT CULTURE

There are innumerable great resources on this topic. CIP has revolutionized industries from manufacturing to health care, and it is well documented, so do your research before starting anything, and don't whip out the company credit card until you've read through the countless free resources. The mindset of continuous improvement will require a shift in workplace culture, an infamously difficult task. Nothing worth doing is easy.

Walk the Walk and Practice What You Preach

Continuous improvement requires a total commitment from the top down, and this is best demonstrated in a hands-on way. We all know that

leading from the front gets the best results in terms of employee buy-in, and it is even more important when attempting a shift in workplace culture. People will emulate things that you demonstrate are important. Their commitment will mirror your own.

Get Your People Talking

Communication is hugely important to this process from beginning to end. It is estimated that 80 percent of employee suggestions result in improvements, and the 20 percent that don't are still showing you an opportunity exists for improvement, even if the solution is not immediately obvious. You will not get suggestions if you ignore your team. Even just listening and then not acting on the suggestions will show that you aren't taking their ideas seriously. Listen, ask questions, discuss ideas, and act

—or risk the fragile credibility of the program.

Give Them Room to Work

Employees that are overwhelmed with daily tasks and barely staying above water are probably not looking for ways to improve the operation. If anything, people with more work than they can handle aren't looking at anything except other job postings. You will get better results in terms of quality suggestions and improvements if the staff are not just empowered, but have the time and energy to devote to continuous improvement. This is a fine line, as tasks seem to expand to fit whatever time is allotted to complete them (Parkinson's Law). Try getting your team involved to determine how long tasks should take and how the day's work should be organized. They will likely surprise you.



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Don't Be Too Selective When it Comes to Positive Change

Once you open the door to suggestions and show that you are serious about making changes, you will get a lot of ideas. It can be tempting to only focus on changes that will impact your operation in an obvious and measurable way, but these are not the only improvements that have value. Changes that improve the P&L statement or food safety may be no-brainers, but they aren't the only game in town. Suggestions that boost employee morale, interdepartmental relations, quality of life, or resident satisfaction may not seem like a priority compared to the bottom line. These changes do have an impact, however. Happy employees have lower turnover, better attendance, measurably better performance, and will offer more suggestions to improve things in a perpetual cycle of awesomeness.

Recognize Improvement and Reward Those Who Make it Possible

Once you implement some suggestions that result in a desired outcome,



A proactive, reasoned, and scientific approach can make sure that you and your team are always moving forward, growing towards a
BETTER FUTURE FOR US ALL.

regardless of how small, you must recognize the change, and the person who suggested it. The idea of "praise in public" applies. People need to know that the process works and love to get credit for their ideas. Incentive programs, so rare in foodservice

operations, might be worth a second look. If an employee gets \$100 for every \$1,000 the company saves on costs, workers' comp claims, lawsuits, or anything else, it seems like an obvious benefit to the company. Your results may vary.

SUMMING IT UP

So, we've learned a bit about a philosophy that never rests, that continuously tries to be just a little better than before. Explore the idea on your own, as I have only scratched the surface here. In life, work, business, love, and even laundry, we are rarely standing still. Things move in one direction or the other and, like the cables behind your TV, will tend towards absolute disorder without human intervention. A proactive, reasoned, and scientific approach can make sure that you and your team are always moving forward, growing towards a better future for us all. Never settle for good enough. **E**



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1. "Good enough" is the enemy of:
 - A. Maintaining the status quo
 - B. Great
 - C. Staying above water
2. Continuous improvement relies on:
 - A. Managers who are smart enough to make all the right decisions
 - B. Input from every level of the organization
 - C. Good fortune
3. New policies are:
 - A. Usually perfect on the first try
 - B. Not perfect because they rely on limited information
 - C. Always better in real life than on paper
4. If you want a culture where employees' input is valued:
 - A. Only pay attention to the best suggestions
 - B. Listen, discuss, and plan with the whole team so they know they are being heard
 - C. Take suggestions from anyone other than upper management
5. Continuous improvement culture requires:
 - A. A demonstrated commitment from the top down
 - B. Expensive consulting firms
 - C. Computer software from Japan
6. Employees in a continuous improvement culture:
 - A. Demonstrate better engagement, morale, and work quality
 - B. Will tend to have poor attendance
 - C. Will unionize when they realize their value
7. When things are going well enough:
 - A. There may be problems that haven't come up yet
 - B. There are still opportunities for improvement
 - C. Both A and B

