Program Management vs Project Execution

Survival in the 21st century requires a commitment to consistently improving your business. In our articles so far, we've talked about various aspects of executing improvement projects. That's obviously the part that generates better business performance, but by itself it isn't enough. It's important that the right support is in place too. Here are 7 things to consider to sustaining your improvement journey:

Idea Generation
Project ideas may come from a number of different sources. We've already talked about this in another article.

Charter
Ideas are one thing, but in order to effectively manage improvement projects, they need to be explained well. Enter the project charter. This is a one page document that describes the objective and some of the early thoughts on the project. A key part is the project goal. We frequently see projects described in terms of solutions: "the problem is we don't have x". The challenge is to express the project in terms of outcomes: "we need to increase y". It may seem obvious that x will lead to y, but that's frequently not the case. Our criteria for a good problem statement is that it is short, starts with a verb, and is expressed as a change in a measurable quantity.

There are a number of other elements to a good charter. It should include an estimate of what time and resources are needed, which improvement strategy will be used, and the probability of success.

Prioritize
We should now have all the information needed to properly prioritize potential projects. Not all projects are created equal, and not all good projects are good for your business at any given time. Obviously those projects with high potential returns and short timelines should be higher priorities. But also consider things like how well they match business objectives and resources available.

Resource management
Speaking of resources, the overall improvement program should balance the work against the resources available. A healthy program will have a number of active projects, some backlog of projects ready to go, and a number of ideas being developed into charters. There will be a bottleneck somewhere in the process, and you want that to be on the project execution, not elsewhere in the system. There's some effort and lead time needed to keep projects in the queue.

Project review
The heart of program management is the project review. The project leads should show the progress on their projects at least monthly. Attendance at a minimum should include the project lead, their supervisor, the improvement coach and the person who will be accepting the control plan of the completed project. Each has a role to play. The rate of progress should be of interest to the supervisor, while the coach monitors the quality of work. Reviews should be limited to about 15 minutes, with a few minutes for questions. Show the project charter, progress since the last review, and issues or barriers, and the current expectation for completion. Questions are acceptable but discussion should occur outside the meeting.

For simpler projects such as many of the Lean exercises, the project review can be simply a report of what changes were made and the resulting effect. Either way, the changes should be monitored over the next several months to ensure they are being followed, and that they have the desired effect.

Closing and turnover
Ultimately improvement means changes in procedures, settings or equipment. These should be explicitly described in a turnover document. The person who will be responsible for operating the area where the improvement takes place must agree that the changes are manageable. Often that may be the same person conducting the project, but it's still a useful exercise in order to make the transition from improving to operating.

Timing
This may sound like a lot, and it can be intimidating. But it doesn't all have to be done at once. As you start your improvement program, start with project reviews. As initial projects near completion, add the turnover process. Then idea generation and prioritization. At some frequency, review how the program is working and whether it's time to add the next element.

However you manage the program, it must be right for your organization. Sigma Done Simply can help you get your system running, in a way that's right for you.