



## Where Continuous Improvement meets Entrepreneurial Vision



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First published on LinkedIn 6<sup>th</sup> March 2025

As part of my Leadership studies, I have been reflecting on the intersection between continuous improvement methodologies and the broader entrepreneurial 'spirit'. For background, CI focuses on incremental process shifts, while entrepreneurial practice is all about breaking new ground. Despite these differences, both are fundamentally engaged in driving change and rely on a solid grasp of the evidence base.

## **Continuous Improvement (CI) and Entrepreneurial Practice**

CI is about refining the efficiency of existing ways of working (and the term 'efficiency' is obvious in, say, a production environment but might also be interpreted to mean the value for money of services focused on quality). There are well-publicised tools and techniques for CI, perhaps the best-known of which is Lean Six Sigma. In contrast, entrepreneurial thinking is driven by the environment and the market forces surrounding the organisation. Horizon-scanning is a key technique here, helping a business to detect emerging threats and capitalise on opportunities for improvement, though there is no defined way of doing this.

## **The Role of Change Managers**

I think change managers need to be astute to these concepts and how they intertwine, while also recognising the distinct differences in the drivers for an organisation's change plan. It's part of my personal philosophy to ensure that project teams and those engaged in improvement efforts clearly understand the 'why' behind what is being asked. We can't forget that, oftentimes in a change environment, we are tasked with engaging and gaining buy-in from people who may not have home-grown the idea for change themselves. A robust quality improvement cycle will identify the core issues driving the need for change, and help a project team to develop measurable benefits that will empirically assess whether success has been achieved. Elsewhere, a forward-thinking business will stay observant of the internal and external conditions influencing the business, presenting risk to be mitigated or an opportunity to innovate, and there is a different range of skills required here.

Perhaps the change manager has it easy, with a clearly-defined task to deliver results? There are many arguments against this, though, not least the fact that change involves people and there is a complex, highly-skilled process to gain momentum and support to actually make - and sustain - any identified change.

## **Skills for Driving Change at All Levels**

The skills required to get a change on the list in the first place include a strong analytical mindset that questions what is on the table from all angles. This might be a time to use a SWOT analysis, or something that can help ascertain the feasibility and impact, and whether it is truly something that aligns to the delivery of organisational strategy. It's likely a task not to be undertaken alone, and the principles of engaging and, wherever possible, co-producing ideas shares commonality with the downstream change process: strategic leaders also have to ensure that the conditions are right to spark innovation and then promote appropriate methodologies to narrow the list of options into prioritised, resourced change ideas.

## **Conclusion: Balancing CI and Entrepreneurship**

While CI and entrepreneurial practices both drive change and innovation, they do so from different angles. CI methodologies focus very capably on refining an existing process in pursuit of excellence, whereas entrepreneurial thinking shows a desire to explore uncharted territories. The management team's task is to recognise when incremental improvement is right, and when something more ground-breaking that 'shakes up' the system is necessary. Regardless, the other 'C' is vital here: communication, which helps teams to understand the reasons for any type of change. As John Kotter said, "Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured".

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## Keywords

Change Management, Continuous Improvement, Entrepreneurial Vision, Organisational Change, Innovation

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