

Continuous Improvement

Making the best use of your employee evaluation findings.

By Gerry Kaplan

Why carry out employee satisfaction and workplace evaluations? Ideally employers undertake these studies to gather and analyze the information needed to ensure that employees at every level, and in all departments and work locations, have the training, information, time and support required to carry out their jobs safely, effectively and efficiently.

To ensure the best return on investment regarding your employee and workplace evaluations, you need to have a clear picture of why you are undertaking a study at this time, and commit to creating and implementing a plan to address the study findings.

Continuous Improvement (CI) provides a great framework for facilitating positive changes in the workplace. CI was developed by W.D. Deming as a means of modernizing Japanese industries following the Second World War. It focuses, in part, on 'continuously' increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of all facets of a company or organization. Many aspects of CI touch on the culture and climate of the workplace, and employees' long-term commitments to their employers. From a human resource perspective, CI can lead to improvements in communication, leadership, organizational processes, and employee satisfaction. CI is based on the concept that managerial actions are directed at improvement and not just control, at creating change and not just maintaining performance.

At a CI company, employee wellness initiatives, programs or processes are subjected to continuous improvement cycles. There are four steps in these cycles: plan, do, study and act (PDSA).

Plan: An issue or concern is identified. The processes needed to bring about change are developed. Goals, objectives, related activities and performance measures are established.

Do: A plan to achieve the desired outcomes is implemented.

Study: The impacts and outcomes associated with the administration of this plan are measured against benchmarks and previous performance.

Act: The changes are either incorporated into your ongoing processes, or you return to the initial planning phase to create a new course of action.

What follows is a totally fictitious case study to illustrate how an employee-based PDSA cycle might work in the meat industry.

Many aspects of CI touch on the culture and climate of the workplace, and employees' long-term commitments to their employers.

A meat production company hired a new manager of operations from another province. Within about six months there was an unexplained 9.5 per cent increase in workplace accidents, and an 11 per cent increase in absenteeism.

Plan: A review of the HR data confirmed the increases in accidents and absenteeism. Confidential interviews were held with selected employees, who felt that the new manager had made unilateral changes in shifts and some key operational processes. These employees felt left out of the decision-making process, which was different than the way the former manager made important decisions. Based on these interviews, a follow-up employee survey was developed and administered. The study found that some staff felt unprepared and untrained to carry out the new processes. They also felt they were not valued by the current

manager. These factors resulted in the improper use of the equipment by some employees, higher levels of stress at work, sleep deprivation, and conflicts at work and home. This, in turn, caused some employees to be tired and distracted at work, and more prone to accidents. Higher absenteeism rates were reported by employees with the highest levels of stress.

In response to these findings, the company, through a committee chaired by the new manager, sought input from the employees most impacted by these changes in order to reduce accident rates and absenteeism, and to improve relationships at work.

Do: Some of the shift changes were reversed based on employee feedback, and training was instituted to bring employees up-to-speed with the new production processes and equipment.

Study: A follow-up study found that most of the negative factors related to the changes had been reduced or eliminated. This was confirmed by a significant reduction in workplace accidents and reduced absenteeism. It also turned out that the new manager was unaware of employees' expectations that they participate in decision-making at work, as this was not part of his previous experience. He began to see the employees in a new light, which led them to feel more valued and engaged in the company.

Act: The changes made during the 'do' stage were permanently incorporated into the work process. Training is now provided for all new employees, and employees are consulted on key changes. **M**



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