

A practical approach to process improvement

10 ways to improve processes starting now

1. Meet with several of the people you serve – your customers. Informally interview them to learn more about what they do and how they use what your process provides. Use this “voice of the customer” to pinpoint one or two things you can do differently that would have tremendous value to them. After you put these improvements to work, circle back to them to ensure a good result.

2. Meet with a “supplier” – someone who provides you with something you need for one of your processes. Ask a few key questions to better understand what they do and how they do it. After you learn, if there are ways they can improve any aspect of what they supply to you, open a diplomatic dialogue and offer your suggestions.

3. Use the SIPOC template to get an overview of a process you work in – and to see the relationships between suppliers, inputs, outputs, and your customers. Tip: Do this with colleagues for a very worthwhile conversation.

4. Map out your part of the process in detail, then use the MEBUWOOD tip sheet to pinpoint occurrences of process waste. With one or two of the biggest finds, ask why and keep asking to come up with a root cause – then do your best within your sphere of control to come up with specific improvement actions. Your last step: Implement!

5. Identify 1-3 key measures that would be useful to you and your colleagues in gauging the effectiveness of your process and the degree to which it delivers what your customers need. For ideas, see the handout on “Key Measures for Process Improvement.” Share it with colleagues, so you can pick out 1-3 key measures together. If they zero in on one or two measures, move the conversation to the next step by asking: “How can we go about putting these measures in place and getting real numbers?”

6. Apply the five-why technique to dig deeply into a process-related problem at work. Ideally, do this with colleagues. This is about being more like Sherlock Holmes (taking time to ask questions and analyze) and less like the kind of person who jumps to conclusion and rushes off to action. When you have your root cause, come up with specific action steps to improve the situation.

7. Share the MEBUWOOD handout with colleagues, explain it, reach consensus on one form of waste they believe exists in the process, dig deep to analyze why this is occurring, then come up with specific action ideas.

8. Identify a possible process improvement project, and start building interest, engaging leadership, and doing whatever you can to move the idea forward to the chartering process. Make sure the project idea aligns with the goals and overall mission of your work area – and addresses a high priority. If you are in a leadership role and can serve as the sponsor, great. If not, you will need to make the right navigational moves to get a sponsor.

9. Share info about process improvement with your manager to spark interest, conversation, and potential action. Focus on aspects that will capture their attention. If they're into numbers and quantitative assessment, share the 1-pager on “Key Measures for Process Improvement.”

10. If you have regular meetings, think of them as a process – and engage the other meeting-goers in a quick effort to look at how these meetings unfold and how they can be improved. Get them thinking in terms of the meeting flow, and guide them in coming up with one or more specific improvement steps.

BONUS IDEA

Facilitate a small-scale process improvement session with colleagues. Keep it simple. Use it on a small process in which all of you work – and where you have control over how the work gets done. Map the current process, discuss your discoveries, reach consensus on where there's waste (bad) and value-added steps (great), and develop potential improvement ideas. Then decide on one, two, or a few go-forward actions that will truly make the process simpler, faster, better, and/or more cost-effective. (Just one improvement can sometimes make a big difference!) If the changes reshape the process in a major way, create a new process map that “makes visible” the future state.

