



## **Building a Continuous Improvement Culture**

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After the 2000 season, golfer Tiger Woods did something that amazed everyone. Prior to turning pro, Tiger became the first golfer in history to win three consecutive U.S. Amateur titles. In 1998, he recorded 16 top ten finishes in 21 PGA Tour starts. That same season he recorded eight PGA victories over all. He continued into the 1999 season by winning six consecutive PGA Tour victories -- the longest streak since Ben Hogan in 1948. He was the youngest player to complete the career Grand Slam and in 2000 became the first golfer to be reigning champion of all four majors simultaneously.

So what did he do?

He got himself a coach and they spent time improving his swing.

It's true! He was the number one golfer in the world, seemingly on the very top of his game, and he still had the desire to improve.

This may sound obsessive but in golf you're only as good as your last shot. With so much at stake, a desire to improve seems more logical, even necessary.

I think of that story when I'm asked about Continuous Process Improvement (CPI). A great number of people in the operations group have been on the 'top of their game' for the past few years. They've implemented thousands of performance improvement ideas year after year. The common denominator with all of them is a desire to improve.

It has been four years since bright minds in Tacoma 'test drove' an old program called LIFT (Leveraging Ideas For Tomorrow) and transposed the elements into a management strategy for operations. We called it Continuous Process Improvement (CPI). It was born from blending LIFT and Total Quality Management concepts. CPI is an improvement cycle roadmap with specific tools to help us maintain low cost. The question was '*how do we make continuous improvement a way of life?*'

The concept of 'continuous improvement' in our work seems contradictory to our thoughts of 'work' itself. We naturally think of 'work' as completing a series of tasks until we're finished. Once finished, we move on to the next task. The thought of going back to review our work, to see what we did, or could have done to improve our results seems peculiar to us. That's the challenge of integrating CPI into our company culture. Still, we have made significant progress that point to a continuous improvement culture.

Here are some important concepts I believe have anchored in our culture. It defines what CPI is today and why it continues to be strategically important to our company.

### **Planned Change**

Change has become the one constant in our lives. CPI provides tools and resources to effectively pursue change. The improvement cycle determines or anticipates many types of changes that may affect our facilities ability to perform. Plans, strategies and resource allocations need to reflect these considerations. The CPI standard problem-solving process and associated tools provides the means for basing decisions on data.

### **Staying Customer Focused**

Processes will naturally change over time. Many times they change for the convenience of those people involved, not for the convenience of the person or persons receiving the output (the customer). It is easy to see how even when people do their best, sometimes they can fall short. Know your customer. Whether internal or external, understanding your customer's requirements is the most important first step in building improvements. Understanding 'what' our customers want and 'when' they want it is a never-ending challenge. Focusing on customer feedback is the most efficient way to get to meaningful improvements. Everything starts with the customer.

### **Critical Processes**

What are the most critical processes in your group or department? Many people can tell you. In some cases they can even tell you how well those processes perform. Key performance indicators (KPIs) measure and monitor the results we get from processes. Today I hear people talking about KPIs and how to 'change the score' all the time. CPI helps us pay attention to improving those things that make us successful. Process performance involves not only getting good results, but also thoroughly understanding how we got those results so we can duplicate the results.

### **Creating energy and avoiding complacency**

Improvement requires learning and learning creates energy and excitement in the work place. People get excited discovering new things that help us to improve processes. Mostly, I see people engaging in the process to make a real difference, because they are able to see through perceived limits and boundaries. At the heart of this system are CPI leaders and managers working hard to cultivate energy rather than control activity. Their talent is in highly developed interpersonal skills, and understanding of basic psychology regarding what makes people commit to, and perform. Complacency suppresses learning.

When CPI was first introduced, it may have seemed obsessive and needless. Today, it feels less foreign; in fact, the place we want to be. To put it another way, if you consider the business, you're only as good as your last month's performance - and with so much at stake, a desire to improve seems more logical, even necessary.