

Seven Habits ... – Habit 3: Drive Continuous Improvement

Working with management teams of our clients often takes them away from their business for a few days. They frequently get in touch with their teams at home. Sometimes I involuntarily eavesdrop their part of the conversation. “How is it going? Is everything ok?” is a very common question they ask their teams. When they get some kind of “yes” they feel much better.

My old professor at the university, we called him Ho, had the habit of having tea with the whole team of his assistants in the morning whenever he was around. I cannot say that these sessions were my favourite pastime. Yet, I have to say that these sessions had been a great learning experience. Ho would never ask a question like “Is everything ok?” Instead, his preferred question was “What are your issues? What is new?”



Not knowing the context of his enquiry, I once replied somehow like “No issues. Everything is ok.” For him this was a very cheap answer and Ho countered immediately “So, you don’t have issues. It either means you don’t work or you don’t change anything; you did not try anything new since we met last time. The day you stop improving what you do and how you do it is the day you start falling behind.”

*The day you stop improving what you do and how you do it is
the day you start falling behind.*

Besides the request for continuous improvement and change his

question implied that he did expect problems. Ho encouraged us and indirectly sanctioned issues and mistakes. He made the continuous search for better ways part of our business life. Ho never blamed someone if something went wrong. Instead, he expected us to name the issue, own it and suggest a solution. The worst crime one could commit in business life was the crime of not trying to get better every day.

Conclusion

Continuous improvement does not start with massive [Lean Six Sigma](#) or [Innovation](#) initiatives. To the contrary, continuous improvement needs to be part of the DNA of an organisation if you want to ensure that your aforementioned initiative is successful and lasting. Here are some simple tips that will help incorporating the habit of continuous improvement into the normal business life:

- Ask for the change, not for the status quo. A question like “What have you improved since last month?” repeated during your business update will help sending the right signal. Over time you will get good answers.
- Tolerate issues. Ask for solution ideas instead of searching for culprits. This will remove fear of failure that cannot be avoided in a dynamic environment. Discussing these with the whole team can be a great learning experience for everyone ... after initial hesitation.
- Enrich your set of KPI's by upgrading the often under-represented Balanced Scorecard section Learning & Growth with some powerful short-term indicators. The KPI “one suggestion per year” does not help moulding an innovation culture. Encourage by incentives rather than procedures. You will get what you measure.