Steps Towards Effectiveness

Organizations struggle continuously to increase sales, improve processes and innovate new services. Developing effective practices and implementing them into your daily business is the key to success. Sustainable change can be achieved if you are able to avoid common shortcomings in the change process. **by Kai Laamanen and Mikko Lehtonen**

Why do approaches like Six Sigma, creative problem solving, Kaizen workshops and Lean have the potential to misfire? Recapped from our experience, these are the most likely reasons for failure:
— Too much effort is spent on project planning and analysis instead of meaningful action.
— After a great start, inspiration is lost when managers are only interested in results instead of the meaningful work leading to better results.
— Without clear focus, complexity grows and nobody really knows what to do.

These shortcomings lead to poor results and growing frustration in the organization. Management then shifts the attention somewhere else and the ineffective process is often repeated in a different setting.

Our suggestions for relief

Keep these six tenets in mind to achieve sustainable change and avoid the common shortcomings:

1 **Simple problems need a simple approach**
Start experimenting and observe what happens.

2 **Break complex problems down into simple ones**
Experiment and observe; repeat many times.

3 **Follow the scientific principle of learning**
Observe the current situation, describe the future situation, formulate hypotheses, experiment, observe and reflect.

4 **Collect systematic feedback and observe what happens**
Keep what works from your experiments and discard the rest.

5 **Don't guess**
You will not know what works in advance; experiments will tell you the results.

6 **Learn through reflection**
Facilitate individual and collective reflection to enable learning.

If you agree with these principles, you are ready to approach agile improvements with Rapid Results. Together we can strive for practices with dramatically higher effectiveness.

Agile improvements

Here are the key features of the agile improvements using the Rapid Results methodology.

1 Set the challenge
Start by setting a challenge that is aligned with your strategic objectives. Note that this is not about defining concrete outcomes for a project as we typically do; it is about defining the problem or opportunity you need to solve. Here are three guiding questions to help formulate a challenge statement that is focused and concrete:
— What problems or needs do we have?
— What improvements are we looking for?
— What performance improvements do we want to achieve?

Remember principle two: a complex problem must be broken down into simple problems – simple issues that can be solved with a simple approach (principle one).

2 Choose the right people
Who should be involved in working on the challenge? You will need to win over both key process owners and owners from your organization for the simple issues to be solved. Choose individuals close to the challenges to be solved. Let the owners of challenges and issues build their teams at their own discretion.

3 Align the work with backlogs
Use three backlogs to manage and prioritize work:
— The issue backlog contains the simple issues to be solved derived from the main challenge.
— The idea list contains small and large ideas, from which concrete solutions can be built.
— The sprint backlog contains only experiments and tasks you can implement within one sprint.

The challenge owner owns the issue backlog, while the issue owner owns the sprint backlogs. The backlogs form the basis for maintaining principles one and two. ▶

4   Work in sprints

Proceed through the three types of sprints:

— Data collection sprints to understand the issues. How do we deal with the issue right now? What kinds of ideas are available for improvement?
— Development sprints to design and experiment solutions. What works and what does not work? Perform many, small practical experiments.
— Deployment sprints to scale up well-working solutions. Once you have concrete, working solutions, proceed to implement them in your organization right away.

Work in four-week sprints. They are long enough to perform experiments, but also short enough to react rapidly to unforeseeable problems. After each development sprint you should have results and experiences from a practical experiment regarding a solution, new practice, tool or model. The three types of sprints structure your work to follow principles three to five: working with the scientific principle of learning systematically. You will get fast feedback on results without second guessing or arguing about an uncertain future.

5   Use effective tools

Three key tools help you perform systematically during agile improvements with Rapid Results:

— A facilitator taking care of the process, letting the challenge owner, issue owners and their teams focus on the issues and solutions.
— A toolbox of templates to help the facilitator and the teams manage the process effectively.
— Regular follow-up meetings guarantee that you will make progress. Well designed sprint planning and sprint review workshops make sure you stop and learn.

6   Task for the manager

The manager's task is to help people learn, to focus on the most important issues in the business and provide the resources. This brings us to the last principle; experience without reflection will not result in learning. You will only produce the Rapid Results from systematic and simple experiments if you have the patience to learn in the process. Many practitioners of agile approaches ignore the last principle and end up with increasing complexity and team members losing sight of the purpose of the improvements.

Towards effective practices

The best solutions and experiments are simple and bring great results. Here are some examples of effective new practices produced with the agile improvement process:

➤ **Developing a new sales pitch to help customers understand the benefits of service**
Increased sales, happy customers and inspired sales people.

➤ **Reanalyzing your potential customer base**
Increase hit rate for sales contacts from ten to 60 percent.

➤ **Changing the way you run everyday meetings**
Better understanding of issues, more relevant decision-making, giant leaps in participants' commitment to act.

➤ **Developing a new way of processing service requests**
Faster resolving of issues, better customer experience.

Inspiration starts when we feel the opportunities to produce something great and valuable for our customers. We often generate this feeling through solving simple, but essential issues through practical experiments. How do you achieve inspiration? ●