Continuous Improvement: Your Journey from Junior Varsity to Pro Level

A Comparison to American Football

Author: Jason Jackson, Miebach Consulting

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Often we immediately jump into very complex projects without first having built some of the very beginning levels of continuous improvement and coaching into our culture.
With football season just around the corner, the nostalgia of my passion for not only football, but for sports in general takes me back to my days during high school. You remember those days, don’t you? “Two-a-days” during the hot blistering summers at practices, spending time with your friends daydreaming about becoming an upper classman; or once you were an upper classman, then fantasies of continuing your career into collegiate and professional sports someday. If you were fortunate with your practice and did manage to follow your athletic career into those higher levels, then you continued your training and hard work surrounded by others with the same goals, skillsets, and passion.

Reminiscing of my youthful days in sports got me to thinking about how those same levels of growth and learning in athletics can be applied to my professional passion of cultural and continuous improvement.
Your Game Strategy for Continuous Improvement

The American Society for Quality defines continuous improvement as “…the ongoing improvement of products, services, or processes through incremental and breakthrough improvements.”

Just as there are varying levels of athletic and sporting activities in the US such as recreational, junior varsity, varsity, collegiate, and professional; so too are there levels of continuous improvement concepts, implementations, and cultures within our organizations. All-time great athletes such as Tom Brady, Mia Hamm, Michael Jordan, and Lisa Leslie didn’t start their careers at the highest levels of their game. They began like many other professionals do: by starting off at either young ages or at beginner levels and growing their craft and skillset over time.

This isn’t news to anyone, yet when we approach our own continuous improvement journeys within our companies, often we immediately jump into very complex projects such as implementation of a Kanban system, or rolling out a Toyota Production System (TPS) based initiative, introduction of six sigma projects, or a full-blown launch of a Total Quality Management (TQM) system, without first having built some of the very beginning levels of continuous improvement and coaching into our culture.

There are a few significant elements of continuous improvement that will help a novice manager build up their “junior varsity team” into a more professional continuous improvement organization, and that is the focus of this whitepaper.

First, keep things simple with gradual education and increase complexity over time to add value and eliminate waste. Next, continue by training your teams and fostering a continuous improvement culture built on respect. Finally, as every winning team and star athlete can attest, working with a knowledgeable and strong coach is the key to success.
First: Keep things simple

One drawback that turns employees and fellow colleagues away from continuous improvement is the tendency to talk down to our peers and employees with Japanese words and concepts without giving any translated definition. Those of us in the business of continuous improvement are extremely indebted to the Japanese culture, and more specifically the culture and leadership of Toyota Motor’s Eiji Toyoda and Taiichi Ohno for introducing the Toyota Production System (TPS) and many other lean concepts to the world. However, we need to start small when introducing a process that is often foreign to our teams.

We all speak different languages, both culturally and functionally within the business realm, so it’s important to educate our colleagues as to where these concepts and terms originated. Putting CI terms in a language that is relatable will help colleagues to understand the concepts, which is more important than understanding the word or its pronunciation.

Kick off your organization’s Continuous Improvement journey at the junior varsity level with fundamentals such as Muda, which means “useless”.

Adding Value

In the Continuous Improvement world, Muda refers to looking for waste within an organization and identifying the differences between activities that are value add (VA), non-value add (NVA), and business non-value add (BNVA). Regardless of what industry you may fall within or whether you are providing a service or product to the market, your organization’s goal is to create value for your customers. Value as we define it within continuous improvement is what your customer is willing to pay for, and the value added (VA) activities are how we “score” points. Introducing this concept in this relatable format allows most of our team members to understand how this concept is utilized.
Eliminating Waste

The 8 Wastes: TIM P WOOD

If we extend our sports analogy to explain VA activities as being of an offensive or proactive nature, then we can also introduce the constant opposition of TIM P. WOOD, who makes up the non-value add (NVA) team of the 8 Wastes. NVA activities ultimately add cost to processes, and subsequently to your products and services. It should be your goal to maximize your margin by reducing these costs at every opportunity, as they could lead to a customer choosing a less expensive product with relatively the same quality standards over your own.

Let’s use the example of a parent buying a helmet for their child’s sporting activities.

The parent is a customer shopping for a reliable helmet to protect their child’s head from injuries; that is the value they find in your product and what they are willing to pay for. However, they do not find value in how the helmet is delivered to the sporting goods store, or whether you keep a high number of helmets in your inventory to protect you from stock-out situations. While these are important aspects of your business to manage because they affect your price calculation for the helmets, at the end of the day the customer is only concerned with a reliable product to protect their child’s head. The customer is willing to shop elsewhere for a helmet if it provides the same level of protection at a lower cost.

Therefore it is critical to find and reduce or eliminate these 8 wastes that add cost to your products without adding any value.

- **Transport**
  Unnecessary movement of product, materials, or information is a waste of motion

- **Inventory**
  Excess Inventory wastes space and raw materials that could be utilized elsewhere

- **Motion**
  Poor layout or ergonomic design reduces the efficiency of a task

- **People (Creativity)**
  Not using the ideas and thoughts of those involved in the process is untapped potential

- **Waiting**
  Idle time produced when two interdependent processes are not completely synchronized

- **Over-production**
  Producing more or faster than needed, or processes designed for a higher capacity than what is required

- **Over-processing**
  Putting more into a product or service than is valued by the consumer

- **Defects**
  Re-Work and extra effort that has to be done in order to deliver what should have been done correctly the first time
Figure 1: An example of The 8 Wastes in a production setting

Over Processing
Over Production
Waiting
Transport
Motion
Defects
People (creativity)
Inventory
How to Identify VA, NVA, and Waste in your Organization

Teaching your employees and fellow associates to always be on the lookout for waste is a fundamental practice that will build a solid foundation as you move along your CI progression into more complex topics of lean and six sigma. Gemba, which in Japanese means “the actual place”, is where value is created. Introduce Gemba to your associates and leadership teams by encouraging them to perform daily Gemba walks within your organization. Often a physical walk may not be possible when we are looking at our supply chains holistically, which is when you would utilize a process map or a value stream map (VSM).

Visualizing Value

A VSM allows your team to graph out a processes flow of material and information both internally and externally utilizing graphics and color. Consider this to be your organization’s playbook, drawn out utilizing pictures and symbols in place of “X’s & O’s.” When undertaking your initial VSM creation or later when you pull it out for review, it’s highly recommended that you do so with a fresh pair of eyes to the process, who can be utilized as your unbiased observer.

Figure 2: Theoretical Value Stream Map (VSM) of a sports helmet
Management Consultant Peter Drucker is often credited with saying “culture eats strategy for breakfast”. The sentiment is true: An organization that does not respect its people at all levels will not succeed. It is imperative to build an organizational culture where employees at all levels feel comfortable respectfully giving their opinion, and likewise being challenged to continuously improve.

Both in sports and similarly so in business, we must recruit, draft, and enlist top talent at all levels of the organization. Having strong leadership at the top with a mediocre work force below will result in fruitful gains for only a short period before the system falters. Conversely, if there are strong workers and leaders at the mid to lower levels but weak leadership at the top, then a company’s direction is rudderless and will deteriorate in the end.

More often than not, we don’t have the luxury to wait around and recruit the ideal talent from the beginning. Typically, we have to work with the resources available, which leads into the next step: training, cross-training, and developing our employees. Regardless of where they are within their careers, everyone on our team can benefit from training. Training should be approached as an opportunity we can provide for our employees to show them we care about their development and personal growth.

Proper employee training should provide associates with the ability to solve problems on their own, but only if you empower them to do so. Empowerment and knowledge within our employees is a dynamic combination which enables them to find ways to innovate and continuously improve. In order to successfully support continuous improvement and become more lean, leaders have to create a culture where learning and innovation are more important than their perceived authority.
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Taking the next step: Behind every great team is a strong coach

Great professional athletes didn’t start their careers off as professionals. Instead, they began their careers at an early stage in their development. However, those great athletes did not achieve greatness by themselves. They had assistance from coaches and mentors who helped them to mold their craft over time.

Similarly in business, we need strong coaches and mentors to help guide us along on our continuous improvement journeys. Some coaches will have official titles such as a six-sigma belt recognition, others may not have the lengthy titles but they have the experience and vision to help guide employees on a continuous improvement journey.

Regardless of whether coaches are internal or external, it’s imperative you find the right coach for your team’s continuous improvement journey. They, along with your project manager, will have to remain focused and resilient through the ups and downs of your projects.

**Next level coaching: Long term strategy**

If you are new to launching a continuous improvement initiative, one of the first things you’ll find are individuals who are hesitant, as it is human nature to resist change. A strong coach will be effective by infusing their technical background and expertise in an interpersonal way that is understandable and non-threatening to the recipients of the message. You also want to find a coach who will transform their students into coaches and leaders themselves one day. This transition will maintain the cycle of continuous improvement, not only in our business processes, but also within our employees themselves.

“I absolutely believe that people, unless coached, never reach their maximum capabilities.”

– Bob Nardelli; Former CEO, Home Depot & Chrysler
Continuing your CI journey to the next level

Look at the current field of play, or in your case, your organization and its culture. Conduct an assessment involving key leaders and individuals at all levels of your organization to gain their perspective of where your level of Continuous Improvement currently resides. It's important that everyone takes a hard look and is critical in their assessment. Once you've completed that, if you feel that your organization is in a good place to continue growing its CI level, then from time to time make sure you reinforce the concepts previously discussed as you move forward.

If however you feel your organization is not at the level you'd expect, then go back to the beginning with your teammates and be on the lookout for wastes, find ways to add value, and perform daily Gemba walks. When it comes to Continuous Improvement, remember to keep things simple, fostering your people and culture with training and a CI mindset. When your company is ready to move on to more complex and transformative CI measures, then find a strong coach who can help you to implement these changes in your organization.
Miebach Consulting
The Supply Chain Engineers

Miebach Group

Founded in 1973 by Dr.-Ing. Joachim Miebach in Frankfurt, Miebach Group offers international supply chain consulting as well as logistics and production engineering to large and medium-sized companies.

Experience of more than 40 years in countless projects has led to the methodical approach of Supply Chain Engineering, designing network structures, processes, and intralogistics of supply chains. Strategy and technology are equally taken into consideration because only the integration of both elements will render an optimal result.

We offer our services as a consulting partner in 24 offices across the world. Miebach has over 350 employees and is among the leading international consultancies for logistics and supply chain design. Due to our presence in the key regions of Europe, Asia, South and North America we can support our global customers effectively with our local background knowledge.

Industry Specialization

Miebach offers consulting services covering a wide range of industries. We believe that industry specialization is essential to understand the specific requirements and processes of our customers. We also believe that the exchange of expertise between industries is the ideal way to develop innovative and best-in-class solutions for our customers.

Expert Know-how

For more than four decades we have been developing innovative logistics solutions with the creativity and expertise to deliver state of the art supply chains.

Miebach Consulting provides insight to clients as they optimize their business across functional levels such as operations, purchasing, finance, sales, planning & control, marketing, and customer service. All of our solutions are tailored to the client’s specific needs. By identifying key processes, coaching and continuous improvement methodologies, and implementing best practices, we are able to support our clients across a range of industries as they develop more efficient supply chains.

Our strength is the integration of this expertise in order to offer holistic solutions which exceed the expectations of our customers. We design strategies, develop commercially viable concepts, provide guidance through solution selection, and support the implementation of operational excellence down to the last detail. Miebach enables our clients to achieve their vision by partnering with them throughout the project lifecycle.