Senior Leader Commitment to Continuous Process Improvement: An Exploratory Study of a Military Organization

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates leadership commitment is an essential ingredient in the successful implementation of continuous process improvement in organizations. The purpose of this qualitative research was to gain a better understanding of the factors that compel senior leaders within organizations to initially consider continuous process improvement, commit to continuous process improvement, and sustain commitment to continuous process improvement. In-depth interviews with senior leaders within a department of the Department of Defense (DoD) were used to investigate the experiences, perceptions, and insights of senior leaders with respect to commitment to continuous improvement. Confirming previous research findings, participants in this study indicated that senior leader commitment is essential if an organization is to enjoy the benefits of continuous process improvement. Participants revealed that continuous process improvement was good for the organization and worth the effort expended. Meaningful results that lead to improved efficiency and effectiveness have a strong influence on a senior leader's willingness to commit to and sustain continuous process improvement. Participants indicated they were committed to continuous process improvement but noted that continuous process improvement can be an administrative burden. Participants asserted that credibility is critical when demonstrating their commitment to other members of the organization. Participants opined that top management must be willing to empower senior leaders to implement challenging or risky solutions. The primary contribution of this research is a better understanding of how senior leaders make the decision to commit to continuous improvement efforts in organizations. With this understanding, top leadership as well as continuous improvement managers can gain and sustain the commitment of senior leaders so vital to the success of continuous process improvement in any organization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Improvement efforts within the DoD are driven by novel demands, unpredictable threats, and political constraints such as financial and resource reduction targets [1]. Therefore, a DoD goal for some years now has been to create a culture that strives for continuous process improvement at every level and in every department, thereby improving stewardship of taxpayer dollars while meeting the nation's defense challenges [2][3]. The benefits of continuous process improvement to organizations are well documented in research related to organizational improvement [5] [6] [7]. Efforts to successfully embed a culture of continuous process improvement require the commitment of senior leaders within an organization [8] [9] [10] [11] [12] [13]. Little improvement takes place until enough senior leaders become committed to change and take steps to sustain improvement efforts [14]. Moreover, a number of studies [15] [16] [17] provide evidence of the importance of leadership in bringing about change in the public sector [18]. Researchers report that up to three quarters of the attempts to implement change initiatives [19] fail because senior leaders do not align their behaviors and organizational culture to change [20].

Previous research indicates that successful implementation of continuous process improvement increases efficiency and effectiveness within organizations [7]. The attitudes and commitment of senior leaders are critical to achieving the benefits of continuous process improvement [21] [10] [12] [22] [20] [23] [24]. A number of researchers [9] [13] [23] theorized that the primary obstacle to continuous process improvement is low or non-existent senior leader

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commitment. Soltani, Lai, and Phillips [23] provided a number of possible causes of low senior leader commitment to continuous process improvement including (a) ambiguity in continuous process improvement concepts, (b) mobility of management, (c) lack of middle management support, (d) low tolerance for risk taking and change or commitment to status quo, and (e) limited continuous process improvement experience and training. Soltani, et. al [23] pointed out, however, that this list of possible influences on senior leader commitment is not comprehensive and does not represent theory, instead suggesting that the list should be used as a springboard for further research. This qualitative study adds to the body of knowledge by providing descriptive data about how senior leaders make the choice to commit to and sustain continuous process improvement.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research question and sub-questions were designed to explore how senior leaders within one department of the DoD, described their experiences with continuous process improvement. The collection and analysis of information from senior leaders who have an understanding of continuous process improvement and serve in leadership positions may help organizations, public and private; better understand how to gain the commitment of senior leaders, a critical component of successful implementation of continuous process improvement. The central research question of this study was, how do senior leaders describe their experience with commitment to continuous process improvement?

The following sub-questions were included to help clarify the research question:

1. How do senior leaders describe how their experiences influenced their initial decision to consider implementing continuous process improvement?

2. How do senior leaders describe the factors that influenced their choice to commit, or not to commit, to continuous process improvement?

3. How do senior leaders describe how their experiences influenced their decision to continue to sustain continuous process improvement?

4. How do senior leaders describe their decision to withdraw commitment and abandon continuous process improvement?

Analysis of the participants' responses to interview questions related to these research questions and sub-questions yielded a thick, rich description [25] of these senior leaders' experiences with commitment to continuous process improvement.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken to gain a better understanding of senior leaders' experiences related to commitment to continuous process improvement. Qualitative research centers on the lived experiences of the participants [26] and helps researchers uncover new information related to topics that may not be well understood by others [27]. Appropriately, this study was qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive in nature and was conducted from an interpretivist perspective. The interpretivist perspective provides an indiscriminate exploration of cultural meaning [28]. Eighteen participants for the study were purposely selected [26] [29] from a pool of 146 senior leaders. Each participant had at least 15 years' experience within the DoD. Participants in the study were civil servants or military members serving in leadership positions during the time of the study or had served in leadership positions prior to the study.

Seidman's [29] three-phase interview approach was used to explore the experiences, perceptions, and insights of senior leaders through open-ended questions provided to participants through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The data gathered during semi-structured interviews as well as the extant literature were used to determine themes related to senior leaders' experiences with commitment to continuous process improvement. Analysis of the data drawn from the experiences of the participants during interviews yielded a number of common themes and perspectives.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Continuous process improvement is an organization-wide process of focused, continuous, incremental innovation [4]. Although researchers suggest that continuous process improvement pays dividends in terms of performance, the majority of continuous process improvement programs fail [30] [7]. Most failures of continuous process improvement programs are the result of ineffective implementation [20]. Senior leadership commitment has long been considered

critical to successful implementation of continuous process improvement [10] [31] [12] [23]. However, qualitative research about how senior leader commitment to continuous process improvement is gained and sustained is limited [23] [32].

As noted in Figure 1, the literature related to the challenges associated with organizational change, organizational culture, and organizational leadership are linked to and informed this study on leadership commitment to continuous process improvement. Organizations change in order to remain efficient and effective as the environment changes [33]. A culture of change must be present so that the changes can be incorporated into the organization as it adapts to new environmental conditions [34]. Leaders influence the organization's culture through their behavior while they build support for and implement the changes [35].
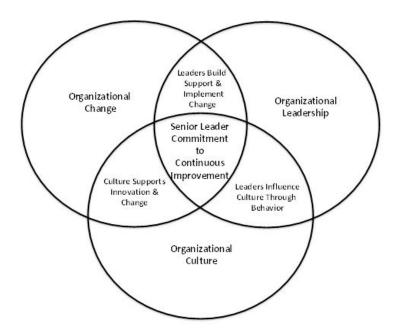

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Cowley [36] theorized that commitment is demonstrated by the senior leader's behavior and includes (a) involvement, (b) advocacy, and (c) use of formal management processes. Formal management processes include the allocation of resources, development and use of metrics, project management, and accountability [36]. Moreover, organizational leaders demonstrate commitment when they develop and communicate the strategy, vision, mission, values, and principles that inspire and motivate members to embrace continuous process improvement [37]. Leadership commitment to continuous process improvement is also demonstrated by a senior leader's (a) acceptance of responsibility for successful change resulting from continuous process improvement, (b) involvement (c) investment of resources, (d) decisions, (e) understanding of their influence on the behavior of members of the organization, (f) message, and (g) reviews of progress [11]. Finally, senior leader commitment includes organizing the effort, identifying objectives, building a budgeting process, and measuring results [39].

The employment of continuous process improvement requires the active and visible participation of senior leaders within the organization [7]. Senior leaders lose credibility with respect to continuous process improvement when they say one thing and then do another [40]. A simple endorsement of continuous process improvement is not enough [40]. Instead, senior leaders demonstrate their commitment when they personally use the tools and techniques to achieve the benefits of continuous process improvement [40]. Demonstrated commitment is critical because employees of organizations will first look to see if senior leaders endorse continuous process improvement before working to implement such a change. Cowley [36] conducted research that revealed a tendency for members of an organization to withhold support of any improvement initiative that was not supported by a senior leader. Employees observed over time that those initiatives not tied to authority usually lose momentum and stall. As a result, employees would not commit their time to a project that would most likely fail due to lack of senior leader commitment [36]. Furthermore, a lack of senior leader commitment can result in a poorly planned implementation of continuous process improvement, resistance to change among members of the organization, and a failure to change organizational philosophy [41]. The

successful implementation of continuous process improvement requires a shift of responsibility for improvement to leadership and constant active participation of every member of the organization, especially senior leaders [42].

5. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THIS RESEARCH

As shown in Table 1, analysis of the data collected during in-depth interviews with senior leaders yielded six principal themes: (a) Commitment Is Essential, (b) Continuous Process Improvement Is Good for the Organization, (c) Results Are Important, (d) Continuous Process Improvement Can Be Burdensome, (e) Credibility Is Critical, and (f) Senior Leaders Must Be Empowered. Analysis of the data that emerged from the interviews with participants revealed that they felt senior leader commitment is essential if an organization is to enjoy the benefits of continuous process improvement. It was clear from analysis of data collected during the in-depth interviews that the participants felt continuous process improvement was good for the organization and worth the effort expended. Meaningful results, or in the words of the participants, results that lead to improved efficiency and effectiveness, have a strong influence on a senior leader's willingness to commit or not to commit to continuous process improvement. Whereas all participants indicated they were committed to continuous process improvement, some participants noted that continuous process improvement can be an administrative burden. Many participants commented that their experiences suggested that, credibility is critical when demonstrating their commitment to other members of the organization. Some concern was expressed by participants that top management was not willing to empower senior leaders to implement challenging or risky solutions or solutions that may have an impact on processes outside their organization due to an aversion to risk. Additional detailed analysis of the research questions supported these themes. As participants described their experiences it was evident that they felt that without their commitment, continuous process improvement would not happen within the organizations they led. Some participants recounted their frustration with implementation, namely the burden of recording improvement efforts in an organization-wide database and a requirement to adhere to a standardized problem solving process. There was a feeling among participants that top management did not recognize improvement efforts within their organizations unless these requirements were satisfied and that this leads to an administrative burden on the unit instead of real improvement. Measuring organizational improvement or a senior leader's commitment to continuous improvement based on a specific number of process improvement events emerged as a major frustration for the participants. Despite the implementation concerns raised during the in-depth interviews, every participant revealed that they were committed to continuous process improvement. The participants revealed that such commitment was sustained by the continued success of improvement efforts, especially those that led to results that have a positive impact on efficiency and effectiveness.

Table 1. Themes Identified in Analysis of Data from In-Depth Interviews.

Theme	n participants
Commitment Is Essential	15
Continuous Process Improvement Is Good for the Organization	14
Results Are Important	10
Continuous Improvement Can Be Burdensome	8
Credibility Is Critical	7
Senior Leaders Must Be Empowered	7

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Overwhelmingly, participants explained that there could be no continuous process improvement in their organizations without senior leader commitment. Several of the participants explained that although they may be frustrated with the administrative burden of continuous process improvement, their commitment to continuous process improvement has not wavered since their initial decision to consider implementation. The participants highlighted credible leadership, leading change, consistent communication, active participation, and providing resources as evidence of commitment.

Most participants in the study communicated that their commitment to continuous process improvement is based on achievement of results and solutions that had a positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness the organization. The fact that continuous process improvement brought teams of employees together to solve problems and yielded solutions that led to meaningful results that had a positive impact on mission accomplishment, had a positive effect on their decision to commit to continuous process improvement. Participants remarked that sharing success stories, more than anything else, served to sustain their commitment. The participants described success stories as effectively conducted process improvement efforts that led to solutions that, when implemented, improved organizational performance. When participants were made aware of the successful results of process improvement efforts, those that had led to greater efficiency and effectiveness, they were more likely to endeavor to sustain continuous process improvement in their units. Although considered an administrative burden, this may be why the organization requires that the results of process improvement events be recorded in an organization-wide database for all to see. Of note, leaders interviewed during the study indicated they might not be willing to work as hard to sustain continuous process improvement in their units if improvement events were poorly conducted, misapplied, or yielded no worthwhile results.

Participants in the study revealed that credible leadership is critical to successful implementation of continuous process improvement. Participants in the study clearly communicated that such behavior demonstrated to members of the organization that a senior leader was truly committed to creating an environment in which continuous process improvement could flourish. Participants indicated that credible leaders provided resources, constantly sent consistent messages regarding the importance of improvement, and provided skills necessary for effective problem solving to members of the organization. Moreover, participants described credible leadership as "following through". Other participants described credible leadership as "walking the talk" or "practicing what you preach."

Participants in the study expressed a concern that top management, was extremely risk averse and this led to, in their opinion, a commitment to status quo, not continuous process improvement. Participants expressed that an aversion to risk on the part of top management, was due to an "inherent opposition between innovation and compliance." Participants indicated that senior leaders were not empowered by top management to implement challenging or risky solutions or solutions that might have impact outside of the organizations they led. This lack of empowerment from top management appeared to be especially disheartening to these participants because lack of empowerment reduces the effectiveness of continuous process improvement. Participants felt they could make a more significant contribution to efforts to deal with severe resource constraints if allowed to implement solutions at their level, even solutions that may involve risk. The failure of top management to empower senior leaders to implement solutions that result from continuous process improvement activities may have an unfavorable impact on a senior leader's decision to commit to and sustain continuous improvement in organizations. Participants indicated that top management should empower senior leaders to implement solutions even if the solutions may be challenging or risky.

7. CONCLUSION

This study sought to gain a better understanding of how senior leaders describe their experience with commitment to continuous process improvement. The study provides a number of theoretical and managerial implications. First, the study confirms previous research findings that senior leaders play a significant role in making continuous process improvement a part of an organization's culture. Next, senior credibility is vital. Participants in the study noted that the behavior they exhibited is critical because it indicated to other members of the organization that they were truly committed, or not, to creating an organizational culture in which continuous process improvement could become a reality. Additionally, the senior leaders who participated in this study clearly revealed that the primary factor that sustained their commitment was the ability to bring a team of employees together to develop solutions to important problems that led to meaningful change—changes that had a positive impact on an organization's efficiency and effectiveness. When process improvement efforts lead to changes that make things better, meaning improved efficiency and effectiveness, the senior leaders that participated in this study said they were likely to remain committed.

The potential limitations of this research were generalizability, driven by the sample frame and small sample size, limited researcher exposure to the participants, the limited experience of participants outside of the DoD and industry, and, as in all research, potential researcher bias. The participant selection criteria for this research used purposeful sampling. The result was a sample of 18 participants from a single branch of the DoD. Thus, the participants had little if any experience with senior leader commitment to continuous process improvement outside of a specific service within the DoD. It is possible that the experiences and perspectives of senior leaders from outside this specific service and industry are different than those of the participants in this study. Therefore, a recommendation for further research would include a study in another branch of the U.S. military, the public sector or private industry.

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