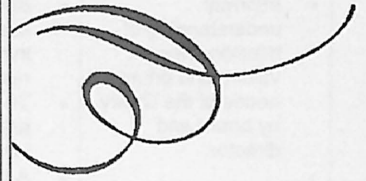


SUSTAINING LIBRARY-WIDE IMPROVEMENT

by Sally Stegner



In the spring of 2002 three members of the library's management team, along with the Director, agreed to commit a day per month for eight months to learning the methodology of Continuous Improvement. The impetus stemmed from a desire to develop a unified organization delivering improved customer service and efficiency. The catalyst was declining circulation, program attendance, and, with the exception of computer and Internet access, overall library use. During the first session it became clear that to attain the level of improvement desired, the commitment would need to be far greater than eight months and would require the development of a shared vision with full participation and commitment from all levels of staff and the Board.

Following each of the eight monthly workshops the four of us met to work on the "homework assignment" from class. A fifth manager, who was unable to attend the classes, met with us and learned the philosophy and the tools as we worked our way through applying what we had learned. Incorporating someone who had not been to the classes helped our long term effort to sustain improvement because it forced us to the "Can you teach it?" level of knowledge.

It also served our efforts well to have the manager of every department participating in our Continuous Improvement Initiative (CII). For two years, monthly meetings were held specifically to work on progressing through the CII continuum (See figure 1). Attaining level 4 of the Constancy of Purpose Continuum was a pressing goal for the team. Continuums are tools used to benchmark progress through self-assessment. Each of the five levels comprising the continuum represents significant progress along the route to complete attainment of the highest level of progress. A continuum is also a useful tool in targeting "next steps" for improvement.

With the Mission, Vision, and Values (MVV) so critical to the CII concept, and with the MVV being the prerogative of the Board, the real work could not begin without Board buy-in. Six of seven board members participated in a day long retreat to develop the

MVV. The fact that three board members had attended an ILF pre-conference on CII meant that they were familiar with the background, goals, and premises of the initiative.

Knowing that the board had given a day of their personal time impressed upon staff that the organization was serious about the initiative and that it was not something that would be fleetingly popular and then pass.

Incorporating other staff members began immediately following each monthly class through the introduction of some of the simpler CII tools. Our first library-wide exercise, identifying and ranking time wasters, was met with wary participation. In the CII way, we were careful to continually emphasize that assigning blame was not the point, but rather identifying processes for improvement was the goal. The importance of measurement, "How do we know?" was repeatedly emphasized as well.

One of the first teams formed was in the Circulation Department. Its charge was to devise a fair and efficient means of sharing the shelving duties so that materials were shelved promptly with the work load evenly distributed among those on duty. The team developed explicit written guidelines for the order of loading the shelving cart and for rotating the shelving duties. Having these changes generated and endorsed by the staff, rather than the department head, created buy-in and helped to circumvent the natural resistance to change.

Additional teams were chartered to review, flow-chart, and revise the technical services processes with the goal being to reduce the length of time between unpacking of newly arrived materials to shelf readiness. Tech Services processes readily lent themselves to measurement, and, after rapid cycle improvements and fine tuning, the team members were able to reveal at staff meetings that the interim between arrival and availability to patrons had been dramatically reduced. Even more effective in achieving staff buy-in were patron comments regarding the increased number of new materials available and patron satisfaction that

Figure 1: Constancy of Purpose Continuum

ONE	TWO	THREE	FOUR	FIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal understanding of mission, vision, values and priority needs of the library by board and director. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning to work on mission, vision, values in response to external requirements • The library director and board are involved. • A few key staff know about beginning efforts to develop mission, vision, and values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written mission, vision, and values in place: • Used by upper management levels in the library • Evidence of implementation in some departments • Many staff know mission, vision, and values. • Reviewed annually 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written mission, vision, and values in place: • Used in every department. • Most staff aware. • Reviewed at least quarterly. • Some community awareness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All efforts by individuals and departments are aligned with mission, vision, and values. • Everyone understands how his/ her role contributes to reaching library vision. • Permeates daily operations, with formal monthly review. • Community is aware and supportive.

books they “hadn’t even seen at Kroger’s yet” were available at their library. Collected data continues to be a source of information for identifying processes for improvement in tech services and for measuring effectiveness of changes. Using this data we were recently pleased to confirm that the average item with holds takes only 1.1 days from unpacking to the holds shelf, a dramatic improvement for a small department whose members also assist with reference, genealogy, and circulation desk duties.

Each department had developed its own Mission, Vision, and Values and soon more teams formed within departments. Previously reluctant staff members began to realize results of the initiative and ceased to resist changes in processes. An important milestone was the realization among staff members that an individual could not simply change a step in a process without team review and consensus and without data. “How will we know it’s the better way?” and “Can everyone live with it?” have become routine questions.

From the beginning of our CII journey, time seemed to be our biggest obstacle. Initially it seemed overwhelming to consider taking the time to attend a meeting (someone also had to make the agenda and write the minutes), to write up the processes, to record and compare data, in addition to all of the daily tasks involved with “getting the wash out.” Over the first two years however, we were able to confirm that the time involved had been well spent—ultimately saving time and omitting wasteful steps with more effective results. Surveys of library customers also indicated increasingly greater levels of satisfaction among users.

After the first three years, the special CII meetings among the managers were abandoned. A turning point had been reached when CII became, not extra work but a part of the way we do the work. The premises and tools were being used throughout the various teams and departments.

With low staff turnover we were able to introduce new staff members to the tools and concepts and to incorporate them into teams fairly easily. Five years through the CII journey, however, an expanded library, increased circulation and library use, along with natural staff turnover through retirements and life changes, have resulted in a sudden influx of new staff members totally unfamiliar with CII.

Simultaneously training a number of new staff members in CII when there is so much for them to learn about the duties and responsibilities of their individual jobs and about the library in general has become an agenda item at recent managers’ meetings. The solution, of course, is to form a team to develop a process master for CII training.

Updating the process masters to accurately reflect ongoing changes is another instance of continuing challenges. New equipment, new software, and expanded facility are all occasions for reexamining and updating process masters. These occasions also represent opportunities to introduce new staffers to process master development through team work. Involving the very newest staffers in process master testing is an excellent means of introducing them to the CII way and making them feel an integral part of the organization.

Managers need to be vigilant against the temptation to make a decision rather than taking the time to form a team and to go through the steps of analyzing data, flowcharting, and developing consensus. Continuing to include and to listen to the people who are doing the frontline work is as critical to sustaining Continuous Improvement as is the acceptance that CII will never be completed.

Finding ways to make the day and the work fun is key to sustaining CII as well. What constitutes “fun” varies among individuals and at LPL it needed a core group of people concertedly planning “fun” to be

incorporated on a regular basis. Fun needed to go beyond the activities of the Children's department and beyond staff dinners on special occasions. Creating fun is work. Weekly themes, costumes, songs, book cart drill teams, joke of the day, friendly competitions, surprises for patrons and staff, after-work outings, and food on any occasion all can contribute to a festive ambiance. Real fun develops naturally and daily only when staff, volunteers and customers feel themselves to be valued members of the team, whose concerns and suggestions are seriously considered. When that occurs Continuous Improvement sustains itself.

Circulation of materials in our library district increased by 40 percent from 2002 to 2006. The first half of 2007 indicates the increase is continuing. Complaints about customer service are virtually non-existent. There is a steady flow of applicants for employment and for volunteer service. These results are highly motivating and demonstrate to the board, managers, and front level staff that Continuous Improvement has been worth our investment of time and effort.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Stegner, Director of the Lawrenceburg Public Library District, has been employed with LPLD since 1990 and became Director in 2000. She has also held positions as a children's librarian, and as a reference librarian at several other libraries. She earned her MLS at George Peabody College, which is now part of Vanderbilt University. Stegner is the current president of the Small and Medium Size Libraries Division of the Indiana Library Federation.

