

## Establishing a Continuous Improvement Culture to Improve Project Results

By Bernie Keh, President and CEO, BOT International

*This White Paper discusses the advantages of establishing a continuous improvement culture and provides a practical roadmap that companies and organizations of all sizes can follow to improve workplace project management results.*

**Continuous Improvement**, often known as Kaizen, is essentially a small step-by-step incremental improvement strategy. It is based upon a belief that continual improvement can be brought about by a never-ending series of small changes. Even in the face of enormous innovative improvement strategies, there will always be the need and opportunity to supplement such strategies and initiatives with continual small step changes.

**How is Continuous Improvement Used?** Although the term Kaizen originated in Japanese automotive manufacturing plants, it is used throughout the world to enable companies and organizations to continually improve their processes through small gradual changes rather than large scale change that can, and often does, paralyze the workplace. In fact, a compelling benefit of continuous improvement is that it can eliminate the need for large scale quantum shifts. It's evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. It's simple and constructive, rather than complex and potentially destructive.

**Advantages** of continuous improvement are twofold. First, the recognition that processes must be improved before performance can be enhanced fosters process-oriented thinking. The focus on ways to constantly improve the process becomes part of a workplace movement in which those closest to the problem, usually front line employees, become involved and responsible in getting things right. A "Can do" attitude becomes a way of workplace life. Second, a continuous improvement culture can and does complement innovative leaps and breakthroughs. In order to have a long lasting effect, leaps and breakthroughs need to be followed up with continuous improvement activities.

**Project Results** such as quality, cost, and time are constrained continually. What actions can one take to mitigate these constraints? Even with management leadership and employee training, most workplaces face

*Processes On Demand is a project management process solution that reduces costs and improves project management results. It provides access to process descriptions, scalable workflows, step by step guidance, tools, PM templates, and resources suggestions to help project managers and all those involved in the Project Management Process.*

barriers that make it difficult to bring about change. The leading causes of these barriers include:

- Incomplete or undefined workplace processes
- Workplace knowledge that is not shared
- A focus on technology rather than users

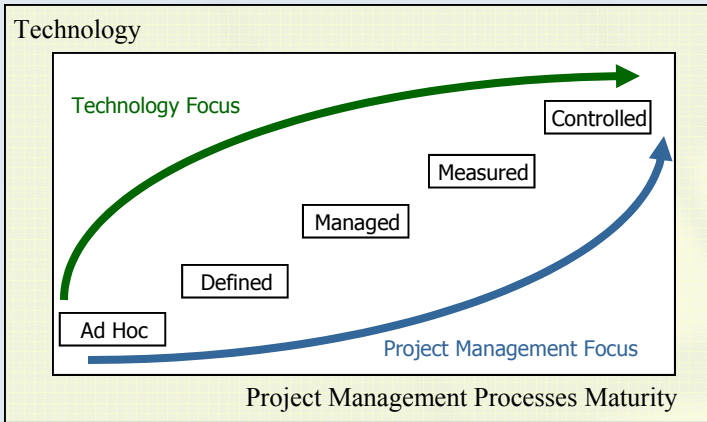
**A Practical Roadmap** to address these challenges and establish a continuous improvement culture for project management includes the following steps:

- Step 1. Define a useful and usable process.
- Step 2. Setup of a workplace process framework.
- Step 3. Use what you already know and have.
- Step 4. Forgive human errors, but not process errors.

**Step 1. Define a useful and usable process.** It may be wise to take advantage of de facto standard project management processes such as PMBOK®, SDLC, PRINCE, and others. Since these processes are the result of years of well reasoned and collaborative effort by standards bodies, user groups, and the like, they represent proven approaches that have been used successfully and could be adopted immediately with little need for debate. However, it is not uncommon that having a project management methodology manual is often erroneously equated to having a useful and usable project management process. While such manuals may be good sources of information and almost every project management office or team has one, they often are hard to access, difficult to use, too detailed, and cannot easily be changed. As a result, they quickly become outdated and are of marginal value. Hence, they are not useful nor usable.

A useful and usable project management process is more than just a generic manual. It describes not just the "what", but the "who, when, where, and how" in the context and guidelines of the client environment. It provides scalable workflows, step by step process descriptions and guidance, clear identification of resources, information, and tools to be used, as well as process owners and mentors who manage the process and would be available to provide assistance to others. More than just a generic body of knowledge, a project management process defined in this manner will be highly useful and usable.

**Step 2. Setup of a workplace process framework.** In order for the defined processes to be effectively followed, an accessible workplace project management process framework needs to be set up. Differing points of views are often seen between IT departments and project groups in determining the most applicable tools and applications for the organization. More often than not, those focused on technology seek to introduce the latest in technology, tools, and applications and often times fail to



realize the practical usefulness from the end user's point of view and the ability for adoption within the workplace in general. Likewise, project groups need to realize that technology is there to help, not hinder.

**Case in Point #1:** Many project management offices (PMOs) have implemented costly enterprise project management applications in pursuit of improving project management performance. Many of these organizations quickly learned that without defining a manageable process, their changes in software and technology usually did not significantly improve results.

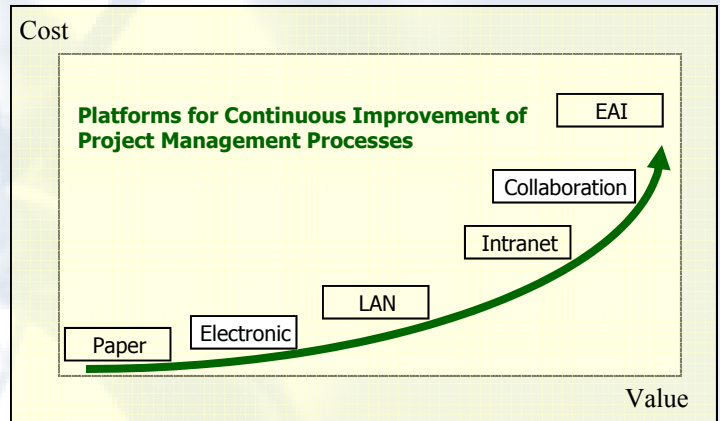
Likewise, those focused only on CMM Level 5 and the race to certification, often fail to realize that without useful and usable software and technology, defined processes and best practices cannot be effectively promoted and adopted in the workplace. Paper processes do not work.

**Case in Point #2:** Many organizations spend months writing their project management methodology manual. Documents are stored electronically or printed and placed into workbooks. The difficulty of access, effective use, and content update compromises the usefulness and life of these documents. Quickly, it is realized that making better use of existing infrastructure and technologies such as LANs, Intranets, and Collaboration tools is essential for successful use and adoption of processes.

A workplace process framework must be easily accessible and effectively used by not just the trained, skilled, and regular project managers, but the occasional and less skilled practitioners as well. The requirements for the framework include process descriptions, scalable workflows, step by step guidance, tools, PM templates, and resources suggestions to help project managers and all those involved in the Project Management Process.

For those that already have a project management methodology manual and a collection of shared templates, this is a natural next step. Those just beginning the effort have a little more work to do.

**Step 3. Use what you already know and already have.** It may seem easier to seek new tools and applications to try to fix a problem than to make use of what you currently know and have. Decisions to invest in new tools and technology may be driven by many reasons - some, business; others, personal. Unless it is a Japanese firm, rarely do organizations have a culture in which they seek to become masters at fully using all that it already knows and has. In order to fully exploit and utilize the knowledge that exists within workgroups, this knowledge must be harnessed and made accessible to all that need to have this information within the workplace process framework.



Continuous improvement of the project management process can be made within a variety of platforms. Defined processes can be easily shared on a LAN or intranet. Workplace tools can be integrated into process descriptions as well. Lessons learned feedback and improvement opportunities can be continually applied. Collaboration solutions and enterprise application integration provide further opportunities for continuous improvement.

**Case in Point #3:** After reviewing lessons learned feedback and suggestions to improve the procurement process, management approved and applied the recommended changes to their process framework. The resulting changes were communicated and instantly available for use and benefit throughout the entire organization.

**Step 4. Forgive human errors, but not process errors.**

To err is human. People performance can be improved with management, coaching, training, and continued experience in the workplace. While human error can be forgiven, process errors must not be. In a continuous improvement culture, those that perform the work are a vital source of expertise in producing steady, gradual improvements, en route to perfection. The workplace practitioner becomes a potent competitive weapon with unleashed potential to provide innovative solutions to the escalating expectations of customers, both internally and externally. The opportunities are enormous. While many people think of defect elimination and cycle time reduction as opportunities on the manufacturing shop floor, they are also opportunities for project management offices and those involved with managing projects as well. The table below illustrates forms of waste and provides examples from both the factory floor as well as the PMO.

Forms of Waste	Factory Floor	PMO
Defects	Scrap or rework	Planning errors
Waiting	For parts, tools, or information	For concurrence from stakeholders
Transporting	Parts moving to the warehouse and back	Data and report handoffs
Inventory	Excessive work in process	Backlog of scope changes
Unnecessary Motion	Retrieving parts, tools, or information	Extraneous analysis and reporting
Over-Processing	Performing unneeded operations	Too many signoffs
Over-Production	Excessive work in process	Preparing reports that are never used

**The Benefits of Establishing a Continuous Improvement Culture** are reduced costs and improved performance which are made possible by the workplace process framework. It is the step by step process that is continually improved upon. Rather than a repeat performance of errors, wasteful things are eliminated. Examples include:

**Defects:** Planning errors such as not having the right information, not using the correct tools, not knowing of red flag checklist items, or not having the required skill sets.

**Waiting:** Waiting for review and approvals from stakeholders.

**Transporting:** The time required to exchange data, gather information, and share reports.

**Inventory:** The backlog of scope changes, change requests, and open issues.

**Unnecessary Motion:** Reporting and analysis that is extraneous to the project effort and the management of the project management process.

**Over-Processing:** Unnecessary or too many signoffs not aligned to or outside of the project management process.

**Over-Production:** Doing work outside the scope of the project or preparing reports that are never used.

## Summary

*“Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just stand there.”*  
- Will Rogers

In today’s turbulent and unpredictable marketplace, customers’ expectations are continually spiraling upward. Success undeniably demands that processes be constantly challenged and pushed to a higher level of performance. But tomorrow’s challenges cannot be conquered with yesterday’s best efforts. It is a little more than wishful thinking to expect better results when doing the same thing, over and over, with no change. Workplace excellence requires an intensive focus across the entire organization to first define the bar and then, to raise it. Setting up a workplace framework for project management processes will quickly define the bar as well as provide the vehicle to establish a continuous improvement culture.

*About the author: Bernie Keh is the President and CEO of BOT International. She is Singaporean Chinese and graduated from the National University of Singapore with Honors in 1988. Prior to founding BOT International, Ms. Keh had executive and management positions with IBM, Computer Associates, and Systems Union.*