10 Commandments of Continuous Improvement

In this lesson we're going to learn all about what we refer to as the ten commandments of continuous improvement.

What is Continuous Improvement?

Let's get started by first answering the question - what is continuous improvement? Simply put, continuous improvement is a mindset and way of thinking that's focused on improving processes while also seeking out ways to improve the lives of people.

Now, I'd like to stress the word people since it's quite easy to become enamored with the many tools of continuous improvement without realizing, in the end, continuous improvement is a people based principle first and foremost.

Of course, this isn't to say the tools of lean, six sigma, and other improvement methodologies aren't important... they are which is why we offer hundreds of videos on just about any lean or six sigma tool you'll ever need. But if you're not able to motivate, inspire, and respect others it really doesn't matter how good you are at value stream mapping or design of experiments.

So, with this said, let’s spend some time talking about what it takes to excel at continuous improvement.

The first thing it takes is **daily practice**. While athletes like Lebron James, Lionel Messi, and Cristiano Ronaldo are no doubt blessed with amazing talent they also practice extremely hard.

In fact, there have been many studies that point to the importance of practice... some studies indicate it could take as many as 10,000 hours to master a skill while other studies seem to think it could be less. In the end, the exact number of hours required to master a skill isn't all that important. Instead, the important thing – especially as it relates to continuous improvement – is that we need to practice daily while never feeling as if we've arrived and know it all.
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And while practicing is a must there are several other key guidelines that all continuous improvement practitioners should follow. At Gemba Academy, we refer to these guidelines as the ten commandments of continuous improvement.

The first commandment is to open our minds to change while letting go of paradigms and preconceived notions of how things should be. We must also stay focused on how something can be made to work rather than why it would never work.

Along these lines the second commandment is to think, yes we can, IF. In other words, when we say something can’t be done, it’s because we know what’s stopping us from doing it. Well, as it turns out, identifying the problem is the first step to solving it. We must also remember commandment number one, which is to keep an open mind. In other words, think of what it’ll take to make it happen. What obstacles will you need to remove? So you see, in actuality, the person who knows why it can’t be done also knows exactly how it CAN be done.

OK, the third commandment of continuous improvement challenges us to never attack people when confronting problems. Instead, we should always focus our energy on attacking problems and poor processes. In fact, American statistician and one of the world’s earliest continuous improvement champions - Dr. W. Edwards Deming – once said that blaming people doesn’t solve problems because problems are due to complex root causes. In other words, the system is to blame - not the person. And since a system is nothing but a bunch of processes, we never want to attack people.

Next, the fourth commandment of continuous improvement is to always seek simple solutions whenever possible. Legend has it that during the space race in the 1960’s one of the major space agencies was faced with a serious dilemma. They needed a pen that would write in the vacuum of space. Well, the story goes that after spending 1.5 million dollars on the creation of a so-called “astronaut pen” the problem was solved. Well, when a competing space program was faced with the same problem they decided on a much simpler solution - they used a pencil.

Now as you may already know there was an actual space pen developed by the Fisher Pen Company... but the legend of how one space agency outsmarted the other by using a pencil isn’t true since, as it turns out, broken pencil lead floating around a cockpit isn’t exactly safe!

But, to be sure, the principle behind this fun story is extremely relevant for those of us practicing continuous improvement. We always want to seek simple solutions whenever possible.

OK, the fifth commandment challenges us to stop and fix problems when we first identify them, no matter how busy we are. In the end this attitude will save us
time, money, and it could even save lives. You see, it's often these small problems that turn into big ones when left unaddressed just like a few weeds in a garden can eventually wreak havoc if not removed right away.

The sixth commandment asks us to use creativity instead of capital. Another way of stating this is to use our wits over our wallets. As an example, instead of spending thousands of dollars on expensive conveyor systems, perhaps there's a way to move the equipment closer together eliminating the waste of transportation altogether.

The seventh commandment states that problems are nothing more than opportunities. With this attitude we're far more likely to make problems visible instead of covering them up with things like inventory and expensive re-work.

The eighth commandment challenges the organization to ask “Why?” over and over instead of “Who?” as we work to identify the root cause of an issue. Now, as it turns out, simply asking “Why?” multiple times may have actually been the best teaching method Taiichi Ohno, one of the chief architects of the Toyota Production System, ever used.

The ninth commandment states that the wisdom of many is far better than the knowledge of one. You see, working alone, doctors - as just one example - can’t fix the problems facing healthcare organizations. Nor can nurses working alone. Likewise, even the best engineers working in isolation can’t succeed long term nor can any single CEO. However, if we stay with the healthcare theme, when our doctors and nurses, and other hospital staff members, are allowed to come together as one problem-solving unit nothing is impossible.

Finally, the last of our ten commandments of continuous improvement states that there’s actually no final destination on the improvement journey. You see, it’s common for organizations to ask, "How long will it take to become world-class?"

And as you might imagine, the only accurate answer is no one knows. But what we do know for certain is that we should all think 10 to 20 years out for what an ideal process looks like while making a plan for what we want to get done in the next year, as well as a plan for the immediate steps we must take before the end of the current day.

With all of this said, just like the 10 commandments of the Bible, or the teachings from holy books of any religion, these 10 commandments of continuous improvement aren’t easy to follow. But these 10 principles are proven to be the best roadmap and guide for those bold enough to challenge the status quo and make things better.