

How Toyota Pulls Improvement from the Front Line

by Brad Power

June 24, 2011

Toyota is famous for its Toyota Production System, an approach that effectively engages front-line workers in improving their work. As I argued in my last post, “pulling” improvement from the front line is critical to continually improve operations, and Toyota does it very well. Companies that “push” work improvements from the top usually generate tepid front-line enthusiasm. Despite some missteps in the last couple of years, Toyota’s ascent to the top of the auto industry has been for one reason: quality. And a big reason for its unrivaled quality is worker participation in process improvement. A platitude? Hardly. The company implements an average of nine ideas per employee per year, as described in Chuck Yorke and Norman Bodek’s book *All You Gotta Do Is Ask*.

How does Toyota do it? There are three essential elements: context, management processes, and people.

The **context** is crucial: Constant improvement is part of everyone’s job description. Toyota’s culture encourages front-line workers to suggest local improvements and help make them. Management has established a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the workforce. Managers and workers can make improvement part of their jobs without fear because streamlining work won’t eliminate their jobs. Workers make suggestions out of a sense of pride in improving work conditions, and out of a sense of togetherness. Toyota nurtures camaraderie through lots of group bonding activities. In most cases, the firm rewards the team that came up with the improvement, not the individual. Unlike most companies I’ve seen, Toyota doesn’t separate top management from the field with suggestion boxes. Senior managers go to the front line and listen, which shows respect to those far from the executive suite. That energizes workers.

How work improvements work their way up the organization chart isn't happenstance. Toyota has explicit **management processes** for it. Toyota defines standard procedures for how to execute work as a baseline for improvement and to ensure organizational goals are implanted in the front lines, where the real work of the organization takes place. When front-line workers spot a work problem, they have a clear way to suggest improvements. Their idea goes through a quality circle of peer workers, which then must be approved by their manager. Upper-level managers view the ideas, then take action. This is a bottom-up, not top down, system.

The last reason this works at Toyota is because of the roles and skills of the **people**. Front-line workers know the true meaning and value of each standard procedure — not only in theory. They have the skills and knowledge to solve problems and an end-to-end process perspective. The supervisors are pivotal in developing these competencies. They check and confirm that the standard procedures have been put in place and that workers are following them exactly. Supervisors can improve processes through coaching, questioning (not ordering), and making front-line workers think and take responsibility. Managers (supervisors, managers, directors, and above) motivate workers by meeting with them to communicate the corporate vision.

Would Toyota's approach work at your organization? Not easily.

Most organizations I've seen would find Toyota's approach difficult to digest. Their **context** doesn't allow work improvement to be part of everyone's job. The workers are too busy doing the day-to-day work, so they don't have the time to suggest improvements. Managers are skeptical that workers will do what's best for the company and not just for them. That attitude obstructs any serious initiative to solicit worker feedback. The mindset is that managers have all the answers and their jobs are to dictate them — not to learn from workers. These beliefs run very deep in most organizations I've seen. They are not easily changed.

The management **processes** of these companies don't support bottom-up improvement. Work isn't standardized (standards may be written down, but aren't followed consistently), and formal suggestion systems (e.g., quality circles) are rare.

Lastly, the roles and skills of the **people** aren't conducive to change coming from the bottom of the hierarchy. Supervisors don't make sure workers follow consistent standards. They dole out work but don't have time or expectations that they should improve the way the work is done. They move frequently to new assignments, and they manage by the numbers, not by the process. Without knowledge of the work, they can't coach effectively. They don't know what the optimal process is. They can't ask probing questions. They don't have the confidence to say they don't know; they got to where they are because they had the answers.

If you want continual process improvements by engaging the front line but aren't ready to adopt Toyota's revolutionary approach, is there another way? In my next post, I'll share stories of other organizations that have turned up the dial of front-line engagement. As I mentioned [in a previous post](#), you need to be careful in trying to emulate others' successes. Just because it works at Toyota doesn't mean it will work elsewhere. The art is knowing how to take pieces from others' successes and create your own.

Question: What approaches for engaging front-line workers in improvement activities have you seen produce results?