The Power of Fear

It takes courage to win the battle for continuous improvement

BY JOAKIM AHLSTRÖM

Succeeding with continuous improvement has proven harder than expected for many organizations. One reason is that we lack the courage to confront our fears. When driven by fear, openness and creativity are replaced by 'watching your back' and 'looking good.' Unless we confront these fears, they can subconsciously influence our decisions and actions, and our organization may never truly succeed.

There are five fears that are particularly important to acknowledge if you want to succeed with continuous improvement.

Fear of Power Loss

Driven by the fear of losing it, managers will often hold on to power by centralizing decision-making and hoarding information. When this is the case, the majority of employees will never be given an honest chance to contribute to continuous improvement.

Yet, true power is gained by sharing knowledge, not hoarding it. Those with courage have recognized that, only when you let go of your fear of losing power will you be able to create an environment where everyone is empowered to engage. Do you have the courage to distribute decision-making power in your organization? Or are you afraid your colleagues will prove to be at least as capable as you are?

Fear of Regret

I often hear people asking, "Why didn't we do this earlier?" To me, the question has a simple answer: "Because we didn't know then what we know now."

The decision to change course is a sign of progress that should be celebrated. Yet, when the fear of regret is overwhelming,

we tend to defend the perspective that made that previous choice seem rational. Unfortunately, by defending your historical choices, you also prevent yourself from creating a better future. The courageous person accepts the present and lets go of the past. Since they are confident that they have done and will do the best they can in every situation, they are able to change their perspective without guilt or remorse. This allows them to go from defending their own viewpoint to sharing another person's perspective, which creates the most optimal conditions for future success.

Fear of Losing Face

In the short tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes," two weavers promise an emperor a new suit of clothes that is invisible to those unfit for their positions. When the emperor parades these new clothes before his subjects, it takes the untainted mind of a child to point out the obvious fact that the emperor is naked. When you see the kind of behavior this tale illustrates in an organization, you know that fear of losing face permeates the environment. That's when you will hear a lot of talk about following routines and processes, and not much conversation about shared purposes and customer needs.

It takes courage to ask daring questions like, "Why are we measuring this?" and "What is the purpose of this meeting?" When you're not afraid to lose face, you can stop unnecessary window dressing activities and spend your energy on important improvement initiatives instead.

Fear of Falling Behind

If the fear of falling behind is widespread in an organization, the focus will be on doing as much as possible without ensuring that what you are doing are the right things. In this environment, piles of paper on your desk and tons of unanswered emails show that you have a lot to do. But this may lead to a false sense of productivity. When you let go of your fear of falling behind, you will be able to stop focusing on short-term productivity and spend some time on the strategic initiatives you 'never had the time address because of all the firefighting.' Do you have the courage to take time to reflect and try to find a smarter way of doing things? That's when the work can become part of the growth strategy it is supposed to be.

> **"Do you have the courage to distribute decision-making power in your organization?"**

Fear of Losing Friends

Do you have the courage to hold your colleagues accountable or are you too afraid of ruining your relationships? In organizations where there is fear of alienating coworkers, people are afraid of expecting too much of each other. Instead, they tiptoe around one another to avoid ruining an otherwise friendly atmosphere. The courageous realize that true friendship and collaboration is about expecting the very best of one another rather than allowing each other to be lesser versions of themselves. When you let go of your fear of losing friends, you can start helping your colleagues to utilize their full potential and strengths. The effect will be improved results, personal growth and superficial friendships that turn into deep and mutual trust.

Confronting the Five Fears

When you have the courage to confront these five fears, you will uncover the true root cause of those obstacles that can forever prevent you from succeeding. Remember that your fears will lose their power when they are exposed. The courage to talk openly about these fears will be rewarded with true power, satisfaction, recognition, peace of mind, rewarding relationships and a foundation for truly succeeding with continuous improvement. ✪

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