



Agility in Continuous Improvement

How leaders in Tech & Digital can get more time back, have less stress and have a happier, more engaged team.

A white paper for Corporate Leaders in Technology & Digital

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THE THREEFOLD CHALLENGE

Leaders in Tech & Digital find themselves spending an average of 50%¹ (and in many cases more) of their time putting out fires, managing issues and addressing collateral damage related to three key challenges; taking them away from casting vision, working strategically and inspiring the team.

1 There isn't enough time to solve all of the problems.

More problems exist than problem solvers can keep up with. Problems repeat themselves and cascade into other issues. Leaders and their teams end up on the back foot, in a vicious cycle of not having enough time to fix root causes while needing to spend more time on the symptoms of the root cause.

2 More often than not, short-term urgency supersedes medium-long term importance.

Many of the root cause fixes are put on hold in favour of putting out the shorter-term fire that is burning. Often the previously patched up problem smoulders for a while until it flares up at just the right time, requiring a heroic effort to solve, with all hands on deck.

3 Leaders who find themselves ahead of the first two challenges, invest considerable time in doing so.

The most common challenge here is the time investment in maintaining the focus and the drive knowing progress would slow or stop if they let up.

Agility in Continuous Improvement addresses these challenges.



"A bad system will beat a good person every time."
W. Edwards Deming

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THE PATH OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Ladder of Continuous Improvement is a spectrum, from totally un-organised on the one end through to team-organised at full maturity on the other.

"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."
James Clear

	STAGES	FOCUS	KEY CHALLENGES	LEADER'S TIME SAVED P.W.	TEAM MORALE	IMPACT ON STRESS LEVEL
PROACTIVE	4	TEAM-ORGANISED	SUPPORT THE TEAM	UPSKILLING THE TEAM	~2-3 DAYS	 LOW
	3.5	TRANSITION				
	3	LEADER-ORGANISED	DRIVE THE TEAM	TIME-CONSUMING FOR THE LEADER	~1 DAY	 MEDIUM
	2.5	TRANSITION				
REACTIVE	2	SEMI-ORGANISED	KEY ROOT-CAUSE FIXES	SHORT-TERM STILL TAKES PRECEDENCE	~1/2 DAY	 HIGH
	1.5	TRANSITION				
	1	UN-ORGANISED	PUTTING OUT FIRES	PROBLEMS REGULARLY RECUR AND CASCADE	NO TIME SAVED	 VERY HIGH

STAGES ON THE LADDER OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

STAGE 1 | UN-ORGANISED

Features of this stage

- There are continuously more problems than problem solvers can manage.
- Most problems that occur are not actually solved, only patched over.
- Short-term urgency nearly always trumps medium-to-long term importance.

Challenges

- High amounts of both the leader and the team's time is spent putting out fires and addressing issues directly or indirectly caused by faltering processes, standards and ways of working
- There is seldom a sense of actually getting on top of the fires.
- Team morale is suffering and it is likely that most of the team are overworked and dis-engaged.
- Problems often become crises.
- Impact on stress levels is very high.

Benefits

- None

How to progress

- Assess what is most important as a team. What is our north star? What are we committed to? And, critically, are we all absolutely aligned around it?
- Together with the team, map the problem landscape. What is the macro view of that map? Where are the themes? What are the hot spots?
- Determine criteria, aligned with the north star, that will allow prioritisation and bringing out of the most critical items whose root cause will be solved first.

It's like playing whack-a-mole day-in and day-out without end.

"Much of the stress that people feel doesn't come from having too much to do. It comes from not finishing what they started."
David Allen



STAGES ON THE LADDER OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

STAGE 2 | SEMI-ORGANISED

Features of this stage

- Continuous improvement is a focus from time to time
- The most critical challenges are solved at their origin

Challenges

- High degree of confusion about what is priority in the sea of things calling for attention.
- Most problems are brought to the leader in the first instance, taking up high amounts of the leader's time and underutilising the team's capability.
- A high degree of time is still spent putting out fires.
- The team is feeling disheartened and frustrated.
- The impact on stress levels is still high for all.

Benefits

- The highest priority items and their associated root causes are addressed

How to progress

- Create a program of work based on the highest priority items to solve for.
- Organise the team, plan out what needs to be done, and begin executing.
- Track what was done against what was expected.

It's like gardening and pulling out a weed by the root. The satisfaction! And then you look around and realise that the little seeds from the bloom of that weed have been scattered throughout the garden.

"It's not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?"
Henry David Thoreau



STAGES ON THE LADDER OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

STAGE 3 | LEADER-ORGANISED

Features of this stage

- The leader owns and drives a program of continuous improvement.
- The leader generally determines both the highest priority items to focus on as well as how to solve the problems.

Challenges

- Without the leader driving the effort, it will stall.
- A large amount of the leader's time is spent owning and driving it.
- The team don't take full ownership and are still not fully engaged.
- The full collective brainpower and experience of the team is underutilised.

Benefits

- Progress is made in the continuous improvement of processes, standards and ways of working.
- The team are more engaged since progress is being made and the environment feels less reactive.

How to progress

- Implement the Operational Agility in Continuous Improvement model of Significance-Delegation-Process outlined in the next section.

It's like being the captain of a ship with a full crew to run it. But instead of setting strategy, inspiring the crew, and creating a great environment for them to thrive and grow, you find yourself telling them how to fuel the tank, clean the deck, steer the ship, drop the anchor and cook the food. And sometimes you're even doing it for them!

"As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others."
Bill Gates



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STAGES ON THE LADDER OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

STAGE 4 | TEAM-ORGANISED

Features of this stage

- The team self-organises to make progress.
- The team owns the program of work.
- The leader supports, removes roadblocks, and provides resources where needed for the team to progress.

Challenges

- The team may need upskilling and/or coaching and support for the transition.

Benefits

- Minimal time is needed from the leader.
- The process would run itself if the leader weren't present.
- Low impact on stress levels.
- The full collective brainpower of the team is utilised.
- Time previously spent on firefighting and being reactive can be refocused.

How to progress

- Build in key mechanisms for the process to improve on itself.
- Ensure the right processes, tools, practices and cultural elements are in place for its running.
- Deepen key cultural aspects for continued maturity

It's like being the captain of a ship with a crew who fully own the running and maintenance of it.

"There's a way to do it better – find it."
Thomas A. Edison



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LEVEL UP TO STAGE 4 WITH AGILITY IN CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Agility in Continuous Improvement model of Meaning, Authority and Process achieves the 3 key elements required to make full maturity in continuous improvement a reality.

Team Ownership

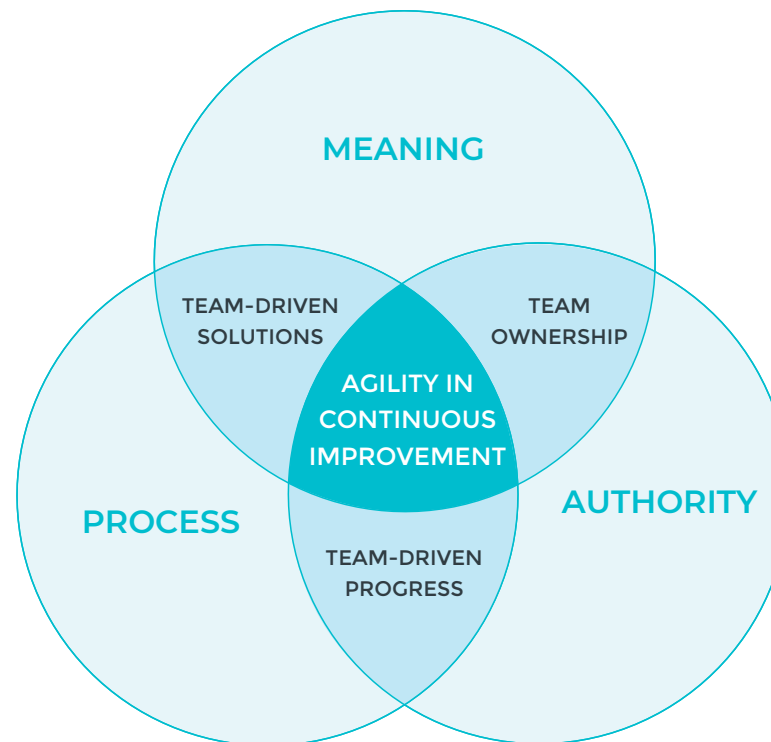
The team takes full ownership for continuous improvement.

Team-driven Solutions

The team collaborates to solve the problems and create the solutions needed for great execution

Team-driven Progress

The team self-organises to progress and drive-forward the programme of work



“
A good system shortens
the road to the goal.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

THE 3 KEY ELEMENTS: MEANING, AUTHORITY AND PROCESS

Meaning

Make it meaningful!

What matters most to us as a team? What is our vision and purpose? What is our North Star? This is one of the most critical co-created steps to engagement.³

Then, draw out the things that are most meaningful and valuable to fix.

Help the team to consider multiple angles to problems and challenges. For example, in addition to our team's perspective, what might our customers and/or key stakeholders think? How might they see it?

In light of those elements, what problems, processes and ways of working are most urgent and important for us to address in order to operate efficiently and effectively as a team?

Authority

Give the team the space to operate.

They need the right amount of authority to make decisions and to execute on continuous improvement.

In some cases, upskilling and training may be necessary ahead of some levels of delegation while other levels of delegation can start sooner.

A key here is to be clear on what is delegated and what is reserved.

Complexity science has shown that there is a tension to hold between too much delegation and just enough.⁴ We need to fine tune, inspect and adapt as we progress.

Process

Lay the tracks for the train to run, so that it can run on its own.

Set up the right practices, ceremonies, processes, tools and access points for inspection and adaptation.

The leader's role in the process is to provide support, resources, guidance and a helping hand to remove roadblocks.

This ensures a team-organised continuous improvement process has a platform to run on.

³ *Mastering Leadership* by Anderson & Adams

⁴ *Inviting Leadership* by Daniel Mezick

About the Author

I am passionate about helping leaders and teams navigate and thrive in the often chaotic, high pressure, complex and high-stakes business and market environments they find themselves in.

I refuse to believe that we must in any way fall victim to our environment, to the pressure and speed of change and disruption we experience in today's world. Instead, I am a firm believer that with the right practices, the right approach and the right way of being, we can not only thrive in those environments, but we can also leverage the very qualities of those environments to our advantage.

Having operated in agile leadership roles and facilitated, coached and trained agility in leadership for over a decade, you can think of me like your "Adventure Guide" for Agility in Leadership in the jungle of today's disruptive, highly interconnected, demanding and complex business and market landscape.

I hold top industry credentials in Leadership and Business agility and bring the latest thinking to bear in practice across such fields as psychology, neuroscience, relationship systems intelligence, and philosophy.

Let's work together.

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"Glenn has a real passion for developing an agile culture and mindset. He played a leading role at Frucor Suntory and was instrumental in facilitating a successful change to an agile culture and way of working. He is a really accomplished facilitator and I have no hesitation in recommending him.."

Pieter Bakker
Chief Information Officer

"It is rare you will meet someone with the same passion and commitment.. Glenn has an uncanny ability to connect with anyone at any level, making him an exceptional facilitator and leader. I've really enjoying working with him and hope to work together again in the future!"

Gavin Sharkey
Head of Technology & Operations

"Having worked with Glenn over the last 5 years, I would put him in the top echelon of facilitators. His expertise and agility in facilitating is extremely effective. I have no hesitation in recommending him."

Brad Erceg
Sales Director

"Glenn has an impressive energy and ability to effectively connect with people, combining both a professional and a personal approach. He has provided enormous value.. Excellent to work with and very capable."

Barbara Ciano
Value Stream Manager, Supply Chain

"Glenn is that rare breed that gets the big picture and also delivers when it comes to detail. His proactive thinking, clear communication and desire to make every project as good as it can possibly be, makes him an absolute pleasure to work with."

Jane Gwynn
Digital & Marcomms Specialist



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