

What's the dream?

A new concept for Kaizen events

By: David Shaked

One of my clients, a successful fashion brand has been working with me, for several months, reviewing and developing their approach to process improvement or as they call it – CIP (Continuous Improvement Programme). Over this period, they have continuously improved their own approach to running process improvement workshops (some of us call them Kaizen events or 'Work outs'). As they learned more and more about Appreciative Inquiry and strength-based approaches to change, they started integrating the tools, questions, thinking and processes into their workshop design. All these changes seem to have helped create greater energy, creativity, engagement and... results!

Recently, I joined a couple of CIP workshops they held. My role was to be an observer rather than a facilitator. The CIP team was already confident facilitating the event so my focus was on appreciatively observing their process and providing insights (or 'feed forward' to those who are familiar with the process) to the team after the event. Having observed their process, I believe they have created a uniquely powerful design for process improvement workshops. The last workshop I observed was particularly impressive in how quickly it engaged the team in a positive way.

The workshop focused on delivering improvement to customer-specific labelling. In other words, improving the process they followed to specify, source and deliver customised labelling on their products to specific large accounts. How they performed their processes and the ideas they arrived will be unique to them but their approach to the improvement process impressed me in its simplicity, strengths-orientation and in how quickly it created a constructive 'container' for ideas to emerge. In this article, I would like to share their design in the hope it could be useful to others. I, and they, would appreciate your reflections and any suggestions you may have to improve the design even further.

The workshop design

The workshop began with a few words from the CIP leader and from a member of the sales team to provide the context – why was this process chosen and what impact was hoped for. Next, a quick icebreaker game was introduced. The members of the group (representing all functions that touch the process from sales, production, customer services and the warehouse) organised themselves into pairs with people they do not work with on a regular basis. The task that was given is to find out in turns what their partners' roles were in the labelling process and what is working well / has worked well in the process. Next, using a soft ball thrown from one participant to the other, each member in turns introduced their partners and shared their partners' roles and view about what was working well. This game and the context provided earlier both helped the team members know each other and gain a useful sense of their part in the overall landscape of customer labelling.

Next, a key question was introduced – “suppose we had a dream labelling process, what would you like to have? What would be different?”. Star-shaped post-it notes were handed out and everyone started writing their ideas/wishes/views about the perfect future. After a few minutes of reflection, each member read out their ideas. The team then organised their ideas in the logical order they would appear in the process from end to end. This process also ensured that ideas expressed by more than one member were combined into one. Some ideas seemed to be opposites of each other yet, both options were still included.

Following a short break, the star-shaped post-it notes were organised on a flip chart paper in a circle following the same flow that was determined earlier (from beginning to the end of the process). The team then rated each idea from 1 to 5 where 5 meant that the idea (or what was required in order to deliver it) was already in place and 1 meant that none of it was in place. This generated a healthy debate between the team members but having established a positive working and thinking environment earlier, the debate was very healthy and generative. As each element was rated, a follow up questions was asked – what can we do that will take us to a higher rating? This question helped generate specific ideas for actions.

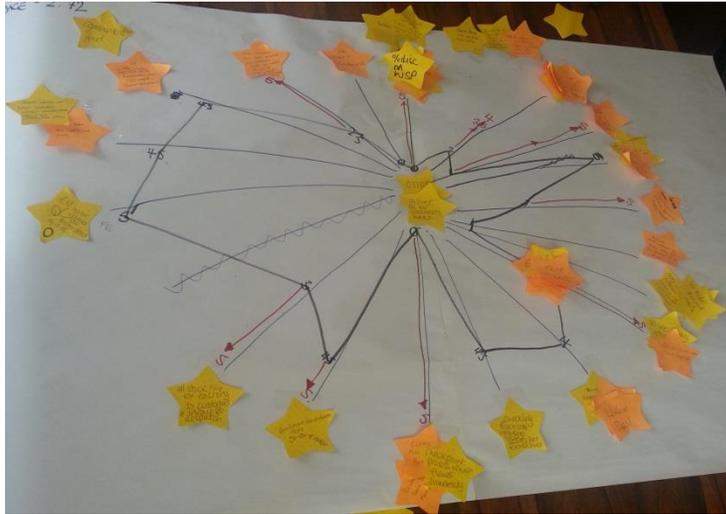


Figure 1: An example of a spider chart

After reviewing all the dream post-its, a line was drawn to connect the current rating for each element. This data was used as a baseline rating against which, future assessments will be compared with.

A short recap of all the actions that have been agreed during the spider chart conversation followed and then the team created a provocative proposition to describe their hopes for the process. The dream was based on all the excellent ideas that were raised earlier. The workshop facilitators used the OPERA¹ process to enable the group to reach the final statement which was:

“An accurate, highly efficient and cost effective process for all parties involved delivering (customer-specific labelling) on time and in full”

Finally, each member of the team was asked to reflect on, write down and share how they see their role in achieving the shared dream statement. This round of sharing was particularly powerful as it helped bring everyone even closer to embracing the shared dream for the process.

And best of all... it all took 4 hours!

¹ The OPERA process is a particularly engaging strength-based approach to arrive at a widely agreed decision. For more details about the process visit this web site: <http://innotiimi-icg.com>

What stood out?

Together with the CIP team, we used the SOAR framework to reflect on the workshop and learn from the experience to further improve it in the future. Having designed, facilitated, and observed dozens of improvement workshops over the years, I noticed the following 'high moments' and uniquely generative elements in the workshop:

1. Setting up the context and answering the 'why? Question up front. The CIP leader opened the workshop by reviewing the current state of the process and the areas of growth she saw. This was followed up by a participating sales manager who shared the impact improvements to the process could make on customers and the potential growth in sales that will become possible as a result.
2. Focusing the entire conversation on what is wanted, what is working well, what is possible still, and how to move forward. From start to finish, the entire conversation (facilitated through the different activities) was wholly generative. At no point did the conversation divert to exploring existing problems and gaps or reviewing who/what part of the operation was at fault. This doesn't mean problems were ignored. In fact the generative focus of the conversation helped bring up several improvement ideas that would more than solve the existing problems. It also helped establish confidence, trust and hope amongst the team members – these are some of the essential building blocks for creativity and progress. In fact, I noticed the impact on a couple of the members in how they offered, of their own accord to try different options that prior to the meeting, they were not willing to explore.
3. Engagement, energy and creativity – The unique design helped increase engagement levels with its emphasis on co-creation of the desired future. The generative focus on what's already working well and on the dream as well as on making gradual steps towards the dream
4. Fabulous "what would it take?" dream conversation – the entire conversation around the dream elements was driven by repeatedly asking this generative question – "what would it take to do it?". Rather than finding all the reason why a certain idea can't work, asking this question opens up further space for new possibilities to emerge. Sooner rather than later, the participants realised that some ideas are closer and within reach.
5. Continuously improving the design every time the workshop is run to keep it fresh – the CIP team continuously applied a SOAR process after each workshop to (e)valuate the experience and to introduce further improvements for the next workshop.
6. Short and sweet – the entire workshop lasted for four hours. In our day and age of rapid change and intensely busy work environments, having short bursts of creative process improvement is hugely beneficial and appreciated by the participants.

What could make it even better next time?

In our review of the labelling workshop, a few new observations and ideas for improvements emerged:

1. Paying attention to polarities – During the workshop, I noticed a few times when the conversation was focused on polarities. For example, should we take idea X or idea Y? When a conversation revolves around an either/or situation, it may be useful to explore what ELSE is possible? Are there other possibilities in addition to X and Y? Could X and Y be combined or done consequently?
Another example, where polarities showed up is once a certain rating was given in the scale of 1 to 5. If for example, one element was rated as 2, the conversation tended to focus on how to get to the highest possible rating of 5. There is actually a big space of possibilities between 2 and 5 or between option X and option Y. Asking what else is possible? Or what would be a small step forward? Can help the conversation move much faster and raise further possible ideas for improvements.
2. Drawing a process map of the new (dream) process – in some cases, and in particular with the customer-specific labelling, drawing up the process as the group wishes it to be, could help establish further clarity and ideas for improvement.

Overall, I believe the workshop design that was used in this case is unique, positive and it enables quick results as well as building a good level of engagement. As evidenced by the growing requests for future CIP interventions around the business, many are keen on applying the approach in their areas.

Did you like this workshop design? Please share with us your thoughts.

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