

Cultivating an Improvement and Innovation Mindset

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Working with management teams of our clients often takes them away from their business for a few days. They frequently get in touch with their teams at home. Sometimes I involuntarily eavesdrop their part of the conversation. “How is it going? Is everything ok?” are common questions they ask their teams. When they get some kind of “yes” they are satisfied.

My old professor at the university, we called him Ho, cultivated the habit of having tea with the whole team of his assistants in the morning whenever he was around. I cannot say that these sessions were my favourite pastime, because Ho was a tough boss. Yet, I have to say that these sessions had been a great learning experience. Ho would never ask a question like “Is everything ok?” Instead, his preferred question was “What are your issues? What is new?”

Being fresh and not knowing the context of his enquiry, I once replied somehow like “No issues. Everything is ok” and thought I was off the hook. For him this was a very cheap answer and Ho countered immediately “So, you don’t have issues. It either means you don’t work or you don’t change anything; you didn’t try anything new since we met last time. The day you stop improving what you do and how you do it is the day you start falling back.”

*“The day you stop improving what you do and how you do it
is the day you start falling behind.”*

Besides the request for continuous improvement and change his question implied that he did expect problems. Ho encouraged us and indirectly sanctioned issues and mistakes. He made the continuous search for better ways part of our business life. Ho never blamed someone if something went wrong. Instead, he expected us to name the issue, own it and suggest a solution. The worst crime one could commit in business life was the crime of not getting better every day.

Not continuous improvement nor innovation start with massive initiatives. To the contrary, it needs to be part of the DNA of an organisation if you want to ensure that your aforementioned initiative is successful and lasting. Here are some simple tips that help incorporating the habit of continuous improvement into the normal business life:

- Ask for the change, not for the status quo. A question like “What have you improved since last month?” repeated during your business update will help sending the right signal. Over time you will get good answers.
- Tolerate issues. Ask for solution ideas instead of searching for culprits. This will remove fear of failure that cannot be avoided in a dynamic environment. Discussing these when the whole team is around can be a great learning experience for everyone ... after initial hesitation.
- Enrich your set of KPI’s by upgrading the often underrepresented Balanced Scorecard section Learning & Growth with some powerful short-term indicators. The famous KPI “one suggestion per year” does not help moulding an innovation culture. It encourages checking boxes. Inspire by incentives rather than procedures. You will get what you measure.