

Nuts and Bolts of Solutioning

By Dr Uwe H Kaufmann

Each improvement project undergoes two general phases, As-Is and Should-Be. Whereas the first stage is about understanding the problem, identifying and confirming the root causes, the latter one requires to turn the newly gained knowledge into impactful solutions that have a good chance to get implemented. Here are some tips for exactly this stage:

Ensure Proper Analysis

When thinking about solutions for your productivity problems, understanding the real root causes is a vital prerequisite. Trying to replace a proper root cause analysis including a thorough diagnosis of the underlying process and adequate supporting data with some nice and fancy creativity tools is worse than not analysing at all. This usually leads to some short-term success often born out of the Hawthorne effect that is neither substantial nor sustainable. Analyse properly.

Get the Right Team

Not everyone who is good in dealing with data collection and its analysis is well suited for coming up with good solutions. Consider enriching the “As-Is Team” with some people who have the capability and the motivation to think out of the box. Look out for colleagues who usually push boundaries, question norms and come up with unconventional ideas.

Involving the process stakeholders is always worth a consideration. They are much more likely to buy-in and support solutions that they have helped to design themselves. Leaving them out might generate resistance. Include them.

Example: If you want to reduce the recruitment cycle time and you discover that your Deputy HR Director applies batching by going through all new recruitment files only on Fridays, one solution is very obvious. However, don’t forget to “sell” this to the Deputy. She may not like to be told that she is “one of the obstacles”.

Implement the Obvious

Some solutions present themselves as a result of the analysis. If the analysis shows that different ways to run the process have been used in the past of which one is clearly better, go for that one after a careful assessment of the reasons why people depart from that way.

Balance Significance with Business Relevance

Almost always, project teams will be able to improve the process. And they are able to show a significant improvement proudly using newly attained statistical knowledge. However, statistically significant does not mean automatically relevant for the organisation.

Example: If your team is able to prove that they have reduced the turn-around-time for a government application process from average 104 days to an average of 98 days, the question should be allowed: “Who cares?” They have not spent hours and hours on working on this improvement

project to come up with this minor improvement – that probably even goes away after a while of Hawthorning.

Generate New Solutions

In case the solution does not present itself, some powerful creativity tools come in handy. They support idea generation for innovating the way work gets done and – most importantly – help opening up the mind. These techniques almost never point out a very good solution immediately. The first phase is the phase of harvesting the low hanging fruits. Only after these non-exciting, in-the-box solutions are gathered, the better solution ideas will appear. Often this is after the team was about to give up, disappointed.

Hence, take the necessary time for this process. Coming from a business meeting having your head loaded with all the action items, joining a creativity session for half an hour before you run for the next meeting that will stretch you again is a prerequisite for failure – at least in the creativity session.

Take your time, generate a relaxed atmosphere and go for quantity. It is very unlikely, that one out of three ideas generated is a real break-through. Ten out of a hundred ideas might be really good of which one is the one that changes everything.

Apply Behavioural Insights

The strongest lever for process change in a non-manufacturing environment is the human being. This becomes obvious when you find root causes during your process analysis that pinpoint towards operators. Use this to your advantage.

Example: After discovering that the same process under exactly the same circumstances takes different time for different people and you cannot explain this with a different level of experience, it is time to think about changing behaviour. Synchronising the processes for different operators by standardising and fixing milestones from start to end will apply a soft peer pressure, that is often good enough to get impressive results.

Be Selective

Having generated a hundred ideas with many good ones does require some filtering and prioritising. A rather sophisticated prioritisation matrix or just a four-blocker Effort-Impact-Matrix or any other tool can be used for that. The goal is: Keep focussed, your resources are usually limited.

Example: A senior leader who deploys improvement projects in her organisation frequently, always requests her project teams to present only the three best solutions for implementation. The effect is remarkable: you are required to do a much more thorough filtering including a valid cost-benefit-analysis in order to arrive at the three solutions you would go for.

Apply Common Sense

During the journey of applying the newly acquired knowledge, do always double check with your common sense switched on.

Example: As soon as you find a solution “training of staff” in the prioritisation matrix, you should ask the question whether this is helpful. After a process change, training of staff is most likely necessary but not a solution in itself. Training rather supports “real” solutions. The same applies to changing an SOP, running a survey etc. Distinguish between real solutions and catalysts, i.e. support tasks that make the solutions work and help sustaining their gains. Hence, don’t prioritise these items out.