

Five Ways Leaders Can Support Process Improvement¹

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When it is done well and managed effectively, process improvement is always a good business investment. Whether by making project management more efficient with new technologies, standardizing how work is carried out, removing process bottlenecks, or something else, process improvement teams and programs are well-positioned to make significant contributions to project management and beyond.

The American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) has found that leadership teams are generally supportive of process improvement efforts. Over half of respondents to our Best Practices in Process Improvement survey (55%)² said that leaders usually welcome process improvement opportunities and understand the importance of process efforts. Only 11% said that leaders typically avoid process work and do not understand the importance of process efforts.

When leaders buy-in and support process improvement work, they can vastly improve the trajectory of process improvement initiatives. However, some leaders aren't sure how or where they can help and may be hesitant to contribute as a result. Respondents to our survey identified at least five important ways that leaders can support process improvement efforts:

1. Show an understanding of the importance of process improvement work (64% of respondents)
2. Support opportunities and initiatives through statements and buy-in (58%)
3. Give employees the time to complete process work (49%)
4. Provide training opportunities for staff (39%)
5. Allocate budget to process improvement efforts (38%)

This article describes each of these forms of support in more detail and will provide both leaders and process improvement project managers with tools and tactics to drive process improvement initiatives in their organizations.

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² APQC. Best Practices in Process Improvement 2024: Survey Report, *APQC*, September 2024.

Show an Understanding of the Importance of Process Work

Organizations do not have unlimited resources to devote to process improvement. Teams that are serious about making sustainable improvements need to find ways to prioritize the most important and impactful improvement projects relative to others. Leaders who understand the importance of process work have a key role to play by helping process improvement teams connect their work to an organization's strategic objectives.

A majority of our respondents (53%) said that connection to organizational strategic objectives is the most common way to decide which projects are most worth pursuing. Leaders—who often have visibility into enterprise-level goals and strategy—are well-positioned to help teams think about where their efforts can add the most impact.

These forms of leadership investment pay off. A large majority of our respondents (78%) said that linking improvements to their organization's strategic objectives helped to increase participation and buy-in from employees, which is one of the most important success factors for making sustainable change.

Support Opportunities and Initiatives Through Statements and Buy-in

Leaders are often highly visible, and employees pay attention to the messages that they send. When leaders use their influence to support process improvement from the top-down, it provides a key form of change management that helps improvements stick.

Leaders who support process improvement should be a central part of any communications plan related to major improvement projects. When employees know that process improvement is important to leaders, they are much more likely to buy into the changes that help support improvement and less likely to resist them. Leaders also play an important role by advocating for process management among other leaders (for example, executives) and ensuring that it remains an important priority.

While leaders have an important role to play by explicitly communicating the value of process improvement, employees also pay attention to the implicit messages they send. Leaders can make a powerful impact when they demonstrate a continuous improvement mindset and act as role models for the kind of change an organization needs to see. These implicit forms of support are just as important for driving effective process improvement.

Give Employees Time to Complete Process Improvement Work

Process improvement requires organizations to invest not only budgetary resources but also time. For example, activities like process workshops, which break a process down into smaller parts to find improvement opportunities, require employees to step out of their

ordinary workflows and focus on the task at hand. Employees may also need to spend time learning and getting used to new ways of working once an organization implements process improvements.

It's important for leaders to ensure that employees have the time they need to devote to activities like these. Executive sponsors, who may not directly supervise the employees who form continuous improvement teams, should work with employees' supervisors to set expectations around how much time will be needed and make sure this time is accounted for in the organization's workforce planning.

Provide Training Opportunities for Staff

Effective process improvement typically requires training on at least two different levels. First, individuals or teams need training in process improvement methods like Lean or Six Sigma to develop a standardized approach for identifying, implementing, and sustaining improvement opportunities. While some process improvement teams or specialists may have this training already, you may need to train more employees in these methods if your aim is to foster a broader culture of continuous improvement.

In addition to training for process improvement methodology, organizations also typically need to provide some training related to any changes that improvement initiatives bring about. Process improvement often requires employees to develop new skills, train for the use of new tools and technology, or change the way they carry out their daily work. Providing a structured learning environment to support these changes helps ensure that employees are equipped to live with improvements after they are implemented.

Learning and development (L&D) practices have come a long way over the past few decades. While training can involve formal classroom-based learning, many organizations also offer self-paced microlearning modules that break down curriculum to serve very targeted needs. Partner with your L&D or HR function to see what's available and aim to provide a mix of formal/classroom based learning and on-the-job learning or mentoring if you can. A mixed methods approach to learning helps employees stay more engaged and can also minimize the amount of time they need to spend away from their work.

Allocate Budgetary Resources for Process Improvement

Process improvement programs don't typically generate their own revenue, so ongoing support is critical for process improvement teams to carry out their work. Budgetary resources for process improvement not only include labor costs for dedicated process improvement professionals but also funding for the diverse range of activities that typically unfold under the umbrella of process improvement—from training and workshops to the implementation of new technologies and beyond.

A steady budget is always going to be better for consistent and sustainable process improvement than ad hoc or occasional bursts of funding. This doesn't mean that process improvement teams or programs don't need to make the business case for their funding. They should continually demonstrate the value of their work both in terms of financial impact and business outcomes.

Leaders who aren't directly responsible for budgets can still help process improvement teams think about how their work connects to business value and help them track their efforts against KPIs that other leaders care about. APQC found that the top measures used to track the effectiveness of process improvement teams include financial impact, project milestones, internal customer satisfaction, and the impact of improvements on the employee experience. A process improvement program that can continually show its value for the business in these terms is more likely to receive ongoing funding, even as leaders come and go.

Key Takeaways

Leaders have many important roles to play in process improvement initiatives.

Supportive leaders can:

- Help process improvement teams connect their work to business priorities
- Advocate for process improvement from the top-down
- Act as role models for the value of process improvement
- Provide resources including employee time, training, and budgets for process improvement
- Assist teams and programs in selecting measures of success that matter to business leaders

These forms of support help ensure that improvements are effective, sustainable, and drive value for the business.

For further insights related to our process improvement research, see our [Best Practices in Process Improvement 2024 survey report](#) and [content collection](#).

About the Author



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As Principal Research Lead, Madison Lundquist develops and executes APQC's research agenda for process and performance management and serves as subject matter expert. She interviews leading organizations on their practices, identifies key findings from the research projects, and shares the approaches and best practices organizations use to manage process, improve organizational agility, and continuously improve.

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