

# Facilitating operational improvement through creative engagement

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## Abstract

An empirical evaluation of operational and behavioural improvement initiatives, in the development of kaizen cycles, viral change and creative engagement within service operations. Significant facilitators and blockers are identified, impact and development are measured via A3's and the Creative Engagement Cycle of 'share, scene and sustain', contributing to existing knowledge.

**Keywords:** Creative Engagement, Continuous Improvement, Viral Change

## Introduction

One of the fundamentals of Total Quality Management (TQM) is the concept of continuous improvement, whereby the organisation seeks to continually review its activities with a view to finding opportunities for improvement. While significant breakthrough improvements are clearly desirable, the "bread and butter" of continuous improvement is constant incremental development. Thus improvement cycles need to be imbedded in the everyday life of the organisation and, ideally, they should involve all staff at all levels within the organisation.

However, constant improvement needs to be coupled with review and reflection to ensure that the changes that have been made are effectively delivering their intended contribution, are not having any unanticipated side effects, and to see if they now present further opportunities. Another important issue is how change is fully imbedded into the process, especially when that change demands alterations in the behaviours of staff.

This paper focuses on research into the application of a particular approach to facilitating continuous operational improvement and fostering creative engagement in staff. This approach is called "Viral Change" (Herrero 2008).

## Change and Improvement

The fact that people tend to resist change is well known and was highlighted by Juran (1995). He identified two specific facets of change. Firstly, "*technical change*" which is "*the effect on the machines, products, processes, things.*" Secondly, there is "*social change*" which is "*the effect on the people associated with these things*". These are linked since any technical change will inevitably have a knock-on social effect. The difficulty with social change is that it requires people to move away from the established culture of their role, which may tend to discomfort and unsettle them. But successful and sustainable improvement relies on true engagement and commitment to the new way.

This is consistent with the suggestion of Easterby-Smith et al. (1999) that Organisational Learning is likewise composed of a technical aspect and a social process, wherein individuals make sense of experiences within an organisation, and that re-evaluation will be necessary after any technical change in the processing, interpretation or response to information, so that a new understanding can be established.

Thus, if these concepts of change and organisational learning are combined, it becomes clear that the success of the technical component is dependent on its acceptance and integration via the social dimension. However, not only is it difficult to foster such social and cultural development, because it tends to rely heavily on informal mechanisms, but it is also hard to measure with any confidence (Savage et al. 2009).

Similarly, while it is possible to foster employee engagement in operational improvement, there is a risk that such involvement becomes simply a matter of “going through the motions”, so that, while improvements are generated, they tend to be mechanistic and lead only to quite limited incremental change. Though this is clearly of benefit to the organisation, more impact can be gained by breakthrough changes. These, however, often rely on imaginative or creative thinking to identify less predictable alternatives to the status quo.

One reason for problems in implementing social change is the tendency for such change to be imposed, sometimes without consultation, by superiors who are outside the existing cultural setting and thus do not completely understand the significance of the change for those involved. Hence the need for employee involvement and engagement.

This may be addressed by putting in place some form of company-wide improvement framework, such as Kaizen. This is a well-established approach originally developed by Masaaki Imai for use in Japan. It is based on a value system that emphasises continual improvement in all things, at all levels, all the time, forever. To achieve this, Imai defined a five-step plan that focuses on bringing order, good practice and discipline into the workplace, thus resulting in sustainable improvements and the reduction of waste (Goetsch and Davies 2013). However, the Kaizen concept can be combined with other improvement approaches. Lean combines Kaizen with a number of other techniques to remove non-value adding activities from process value streams, while also attempting to create improvements. This is often done via “Kaizen events” that bring an improvement team together for a short, intensive period (typically three to five days) to analyse the situation, propose, critique and test alternative solutions and finally present them to management for approval to implement. During these events, a wide variety of tools and techniques may be blended together under the auspices of a formalised improvement cycle. This cycle is known as DMAIC: define, measure, analyse, improve and control (Summers, 2009).

Of particular interest in this study is Herrero’s (2008) Viral Change framework. He argues that current improvement methods used in many organisations are mechanistic, top down, over managed, and overly command and control driven. As a result, the majority of employees in these organisations are not engaged or motivated to contribute to change. However, there is currently little evidence of formal academic research to test Herrero’s claims. This study is therefore significant in focusing on this hitherto under-researched approach.

Viral Change has at its centre the idea that new ideas spread through contact with others and by ‘infecting’ others with these ideas, problems can be solved, innovations implemented and sustainable change created. The approach calls for a network of champions, followers and influencers and the use of viral communication as a conduit for improvement projects and ideas. Behaviours are the focus here, encouraging colleagues to get involved and to provide a ‘tipping point’ where the network becomes influential within the organisation.

## **Employee Engagement and Creativity**

“Organisational creativity” can be defined as “the creation of a valuable, useful, new product, service, idea, procedure, or process by individuals working together in a complex social system” and is an area that has increased in academic focus following the in-depth research conducted by theorists such as Amabile et al. (1996) and Ekvall (1996). Woodman et al. (1993) stress the importance of the level of organisational involvement in this type of work. This reinforces the need for research such as this to review how increased levels of engagement and inclusivity can drive creative problem solving within continuous cycles of improvement.

Marwa and Milner (2013) in their construction of the Pliability model suggest that creative solutions are needed for organisations to thrive and perform to the highest of standards. Business managers are often heard to express a view that “people are the company’s greatest asset”, however, this view is not always translated into effective practice and if businesses are to become high-performing organisations, they must have employees who possess the right support, skills, abilities and mindset.

Engagement is a multidimensional motivational construct (Shantz et al. 2013) and is the outcome of the interaction of several “individual and organisational” factors (Sarangi and Srivastava 2012) that refers to the ‘individual’s involvement and satisfaction as well as enthusiasm for work’ (Harter et al. 2002) amalgamating a “positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work related well-being” (Bakker et al. 2011; Schaufeli et al. 2002).

It has long been established that there is a direct link between the level of employee engagement and empowerment and that of the service quality that is delivered to both internal and external customers. This is because the successful operation of any complex business greatly depends on the individuals who conduct the day-to-day work. High performing organisations tend to have happy employees who build upon their extrinsic factors of motivation such as benefits and financial reward with an intrinsic drive stemming from a passion and interest in one’s role, a personal sense of challenge, and pride in the roles they play. This increased level of engagement contributes to the success of the organisation and the satisfaction of its customers, thus, organisations need a productive workforce now more than ever in this do-more-with-less climate.

In a service environment, the organisation will have a much more immediate interaction with the customer than is the case in product-focussed industries because it is not only the service itself that will be judged, but also the way in which it is delivered. Thus, the opportunity for an individual to have a positive or negative impact on the customer’s experience is much greater. For this reason, it is even more imperative that the cultural side of change works effectively to ensure that improvements actually have the desired impact on the customer (Lewis 2007).

Contemporary organisations need employees who are emotionally connected to their work, who are willing to invest themselves fully in their roles and who are proactive and committed to high quality performance standards (Bakker et al. 2011). In particular, organisations are becoming increasingly interested in how to develop engagement in their employees (Bakker et al. 2011), given that it is a leading indicator of intent to stay within a given organisation (Harter et al. 2002) and disengagement amongst employees is central to the problem of workers’ lack of commitment and motivation (Aktouf 1992; Kahn 1990).

However, when workers are encouraged to think creatively, this tends to increase both their engagement and the value of the solutions attained. Tanner (1992) comments that “Everyone has the capacity to think creatively”; for some, doing so comes naturally. It has been suggested that creative thinking works best when presented in a framework or methodological process, to guide the divergent thinking phases and to engage both

hemispheres of the brain. It has provided some useful techniques to bring people together, stimulate minds, share information and ideas, and encourage collaborative behaviour (Cardy 2004; De Bono 1995; Osborn 1963). These activities serve as important factors in building trust, respect and firm foundations for operational improvement leading to operational excellence.

Bardwick (2010) suggests that when employees are very enthusiastic and involved, the organisation prospers far beyond its peers. Therefore, to truly gain employee commitment and engagement, leaders must offer rewards that are both contingent upon performance and customized to what matters most to individual employees. As organisations have expected more from their workforce and have provided little in return other than simply employment, it is perhaps not surprising that employees' cynicism and mistrust have increased (Cartwright and Holmes 2006). As individuals become increasingly disenchanting and disillusioned with work and fatigued by constant demands to change and be flexible in response to organisational needs, employers now need to actively restore the balance, recognize the meaning and emotional aspects of work and move towards creating a more energized, fulfilled and engaged workforce (Cartwright and Holmes 2006).

However, given that engagement just does not simply happen by chance, it is imperative that a robust strategy is put in place to promote it. Hence, promoting engagement of employees must start with a commitment from the highest levels of the organisation and then ripple throughout the organisation. Likewise, Gruman and Saks (2011) assert that achieving the desired outcome of enhanced performance through the performance management process may be best achieved by targeting the more proximal outcome of employee engagement.

Konrad (2006) asserts that high-involvement work practices that positively impact on employee engagement are contingent upon: power, information, knowledge and rewards.

- a) **Power** - employees have the power to make decisions that are important to their performance and to qualify for their working lives.
- b) **Information** – data including information on quantity and quality of business unit output, costs, revenues, profitability, and customer reactions is available.
- c) **Knowledge** – employee skills and abilities can be distinguished from information, which is the data employees use to make decisions and take action.
- d) **Rewards** – affording employees rewards in recognition of their efforts towards organisational performance.

Likewise, Attridge (2009) avers that work engagement can be improved through adopting certain practices that address supervisory communication, job design, resource support, working conditions, corporate culture and leadership styles.

- a) **Job design** – improved engagement through better job redesign.
- b) **Support and resources** – low work productivity and employee disengagement are both associated with experiencing low levels of support from supervisors and co-workers.
- c) **Working conditions** – avoid creating difficult job demands and stressful working conditions as these factors are the main predictors of employee exhaustion and burnout.
- d) **Organisational culture** – should be changed to recognize and reduce work stress, absenteeism and disengagement.
- e) **Leadership** – style and support are crucial to encouraging employees to be engaged.

## **Research Methodology**

This research takes an inductive approach to knowledge generation, using key literature and empirical evidence to review the use of existing Kaizen cycles to assess the impact arising from the facilitation of engaging and fostering creativity. This paper focuses on an individual department within one case study organisation, specifically chosen due to their use of Viral Change as a vehicle to creative inclusivity within Kaizen cycle utilisation. The research used semi-structured interviews, focus groups, employee surveys, action-led workshops, researcher observation and participation. This is a rich source of evidence that enables qualitative data to be analysed and provides a firm foundation for the ongoing construction and testing the 3S cycle of creative engagement proposed by the authors.

The case study (CS1) is a leading UK-based organisation specialising in insurance, retirement and investment products. It has 5000 employees, 220 of who work in the support department that is the subject of this paper.

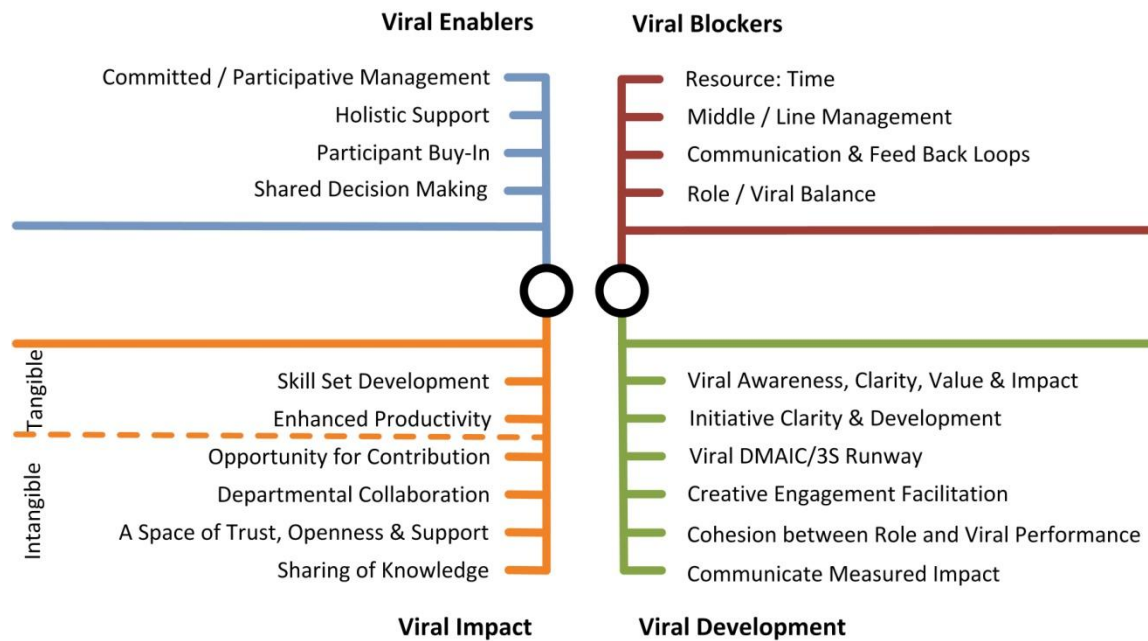
This longitudinal study is in the process of following Meredith's research cycle (1989) and began with a period of observation (general observation and process improvement team, facilitators network and change champions meetings) where conversations allowed insight into operational and creative factors which enable/facilitate operational improvement, or sources of high and poor performance. Utilising this methodology, which immerses the researcher into organisational life (Neergaard and Ulhoi 2007), helped to establish the foundation for trusting relationships between the researchers and company employees.

The first cycle was constructed through purposive sampling (Maxwell 1997, cited in Teddlie and Yu 2007), ensuring that a range of positive, negative and neutral options and perspectives were included. This resulted in a series of three focus groups, and forty six semi-structured interviews with top management (3), middle management (6), and line workers (37) in order to bring insight and a depth of knowledge from different worldviews of the organisation (Bryman and Bell 2007). This represented a 21% sample size, all of whom volunteered to participate. In addition the results from an annual company run staff survey (96% response rate) was used to build a rich foundation of data. A strong working relationship (Adler and Clark 2011) enabled a high level of access to the organisation, providing open and honest interviews. This paper reports the findings from the first cycle of the study.

## **Discussion of Case Study Findings**

The term 'Viral Change' can have positive and negative connotations. By examining organisations and organisational change as a human activity system, observers can start to identify parallels and synthesise ideas about the way an organisation can evolve when faced with some disruption, effectively working towards becoming a learning organisation. A key facet of this approach is the intent to activate creativity in improvement generation, a characteristic that may be limited by the regulated structure of improvement cycles such as DMAIC. However, Herrero's analogy of the 'what-ever' attitude as being antibodies to the next change is a strong one. 'What-ever' can spread very quickly and can quickly eradicate enthusiasm, goodwill and the ability to change.

This paper moves away from the original viral pillars and focuses upon the actual factors observed to be of greatest significance found in regard to Viral 'Enablers', 'Blockers', 'tangible and intangible Impact', and forward thinking 'Development'.



## Viral Enablers

Early in the study, the CEO of CS1 stated that the company's Viral Change programme *"is about changing our culture and getting people back into the habit of making decisions and moving improvements forward, combined with giving them a platform to have their voice heard. That is really what I want out of it, as a by-product we get some stuff that changes the way we work, am I expecting to revolutionise the company, no, am I expecting it to incrementally add to the company, yes"*.

Managerial behaviours, including commitment, participation encouragement and recognition have been identified by participants as essential underpinning elements for the successful implementation of the Viral Change programme in CS1. The extent to which it has been effectively embedded in the workforce is evidenced by the commitment of senior management and the extent of holistic support (time, capital and encouragement) reported by those participants given the opportunity to work on viral initiatives outside the normal scope of their everyday role.

*"It is largely down to the CEO's down-to-earth personality being up for it ... regular communications, leading by doing and going out of their way to make sure we're recognising and recognised for the innovations going on"*.  
(Respondent A, CS1)

The democratic and participative 'leadership styles' evident within the department are conducive to the development and effective implementation of creative and viral improvement programmes. However, the extent to which these are effectively devolved is open to question, because autocratic styles are apparent in some line and middle management, and this is handicapping the initiative.

For viral activists, the opportunity to contribute their creativity, knowledge and skills across conventional intra-organisational boundaries provides not only scope for recognition, but also a feeling of being valued, helping to develop and retain a positive and committed workforce.

*"What viral change for me was all about saying ... you are somebody ... make it happen"*. (Respondent B, CS1)

*“I think Viral Change helps us to be doing the things now within the department that the business is going to ask about in a year’s time, we are trying to be ahead of the curve”.* (Respondent C, CS1)

From an organisational perspective, Viral Change has empowered individuals, providing access to a creative space, allowing freedom to experiment, innovate and explore new ideas, which has led to an increased sense of belonging, as employees seek to better understand the organisation and its goals and objectives.

## **Viral Blockers**

While some employees report positively on the significance of management commitment and the support available, line managers in some areas are perceived as an obstacle to becoming involved, openly showing a lack of support, confidence and undervaluing the potential in the Viral Change programme. Interestingly, similar issues were reported with respect to the implementation of Quality Circles (Ishikawa 1985). When these leaders are not committed to the improvement initiative, it can have a negative impact upon the actuality of employee inclusion, in some cases building sub-cultures and departmental silos effecting viral mutation and limiting the potential for viral diffusion.

The availability of time is a clear concern; this is limiting participation in the programme. Whilst participation within the Virus brings a sense of autonomy and freedom, an overcrowded work schedule with challenging time pressures and role expectations can prove to be a deterrent, highlighting the complex interrelationship between participation in the Viral programme and the existing job/role, whereby such contributions are perceived by managers as supplemental to achievement of existing individual performance objectives, effectively resulting in perceived role conflict.

There is also a perceived lack of recognition of participants’ contribution to the programme. In the annual performance review, a small number of viral participants felt that there was insufficient scope to acknowledge/recognise and reward their efforts and the perceived benefits to the organisation that the initiatives had brought.

Employees report an air of cynicism and uncertainty with regard to Viral Change; a lack of clarity, with substantive evidence of a lack of buy-in and/or engagement with the programme from several parts of the department where concerns were identified relating to particular viral initiatives and their lack of perceived value and obvious contribution to organisational or departmental objectives. Poor department-wide communication was thought to be a key contributor, so there is a need for a greater sense of sharing in regard to the actualities of the viral programme, its successes and benefits, a need that employees would like to see met.

*“I still see a significant amount of people heckling, hiding behind barriers and going ‘no we don’t like this’, stuck in their ways; but we’re charging forwards and knocking those down”.* (Respondent D, CS1)

*“I think we perhaps suffer from sometimes not communicating well enough exactly what this is about, why we are doing it”.* (Respondent E, CS1)

There is evidence of viral fatigue, as the number of participants has declined from the initial high at the start of the programme; an influx of new blood is seen as imperative to re-stimulate activity and sustain success.

## **Viral Impact**

Participants in the Viral Change process clearly identify both tangible and intangible benefits from their involvement in the programme. Engagement and empowerment has resulted in the

development of a wide range of directly transferable knowledge and skills in terms of communication, the ability to network, project management, cross-functional team working, and a broader and deeper understanding of the organisation's culture and operations.

*"it's not the specific things that we do it's the fact that we're doing them ... I think we'll be using some of these skills developed down the line [within our everyday roles]". (Respondent F, CS1)*

*"people are given the opportunity to stretch themselves, I think this will play into [the development of] future careers". (Respondent G, CS1)*

The opportunity for contribution has already been identified as a significant Viral Facilitator, where the initial quest for participants and the perceived benefits of involvement (individual and organisational) have successfully driven the programme forward. Such opportunities have successfully impacted on not only individual contributors in terms of significantly enhanced motivation, but also that the organisation is beginning see some alteration in the prevailing culture and climate, as well as the specific impact of the initiatives themselves.

The programme has been shown to inspire passion, pride and performance. Creative organisations explicitly strive towards the attraction, development and retention of creative talent, those who are eager to learn and take risks; it is these individuals who will creatively flourish under participative management. The Virus accommodates personal idiosyncrasies, allowing employees some personal discretion, autonomy, and sense of ownership, which in turn can ignite intrinsic motivation.

It is clear that the Viral Change Programme has heightened engagement levels of those who have participated, thus driving performance levels and innovative behaviour. Whilst difficult to substantiate, Viral Change participants report a tangible output, focusing upon the development of existing and new skill sets which have been utilised to drive forward more efficient, effective and enhanced task-driven productivity. Evidence further suggests that those involved in the Viral Programme in the role of a change champion, or in the supporting team, are well-engaged in the initiatives and their everyday role facilitating enhanced relationships culminating in more positive attitudes, intentions and behaviours.

Time, materials and access to information are necessary in facilitating a 'Viral Space'. An organisation which understands that teams who are able to take time away from their core responsibilities, and can come together in a comfortable space and communicate are likely to be able to generate and develop a range of new ideas and potential solutions to current problems. Staff report that the champion's forums and innovation boards have developed into a creative and collaborative space of trust, openness and support where informal networks have widened and in which challenging the status quo is welcomed, giving the opportunity to seek and share innovative and fresh improvement opportunities.

Networks, both formal and informal, exist in all organisations; there is evidence to suggest that through Viral Change, the employees within the department have built new relationships, from which informal conversations regularly take place, not just in regard to the Viral initiatives, but when sourcing a different perspective upon an element of their everyday task-driven role. Whilst it is not surprising that the impact of the Viral Change programme is mainly intangible, those involved report a tangible influence regarding skill set development and, in turn, enhanced productivity.

The extent to which behavioural change affects and effects enhanced creativity and continuous improvement is substantially supported and evidenced by the findings of the study, whereby identified facilitators, such as resource information sharing and shared decision making, are carried forward into the continuous improvement cycle with improved inter-departmental collaboration and enhanced workplace relationships.



## Conclusions

In order to sustain and drive informal Viral diffusion, an increase in middle management support, plus allocated time, should bring a better balance between the programme and busy everyday work schedules. In time, viral leaders can continue to invite disruptive innovations, and encourage current and new participants to be open-minded and formally and informally engage. With the improvement incentives working in alignment, the organisation can show itself to being open to finding different ways of solving problems and generating options and ideas, offering an atmospheric space, where innovation and fresh thinking is recognised and invited which, through sustained support and the natural diffusion of informal networks, will feed into the cultural platform and the wider organisation. In order to sustain development, clarity must be written into the Viral objectives, and disseminated, in order to share the potential value and impact of the virus, and be conducive to viral participation and creative thinking; encouraging employees to challenge the present and act beyond current wisdom. The key may be to bring equilibrium to the somewhat imbalanced messages being perceived and the variance in support from senior and middle management. Issues of openness and accessibility need to be considered and addressed in such a way that individuals would feel welcomed into the programme at any stage.

The gains made by the Viral initiative improvements need to be sustained in order to build credibility and ensure the improvement effort will not have been in vain. Bringing forth new projects, crossing the boundaries of other improvement programmes, build fresh momentum, moving on to a second and third generation of initiatives will help facilitate this. The progress of the viral initiatives need to be more clearly and visibly measured and demonstrated in terms of: Initiative impact 'as is' versus 'could be' (prior to implementation) and 'as was' versus 'as is' (post implementation).

The development and use of a Viral Initiative Runway (Visual A3), utilising the DMAIC or 3S (share, scene and sustain) cycle of Creative Engagement (in development) would help build a foundation of credibility.

It is widely recognised that cultural change takes time; the Viral Change programme in CS1 currently works as an initial platform of incremental, as opposed to naturally occurring evolutionary change, which should be its overall objective. The contribution and benefits of each initiative within the programme need to be clearly identified, communicated and embedded across the organisation, before seeking to drive forward with future innovations.

## Future Research

The development of the Viral Change programme in CS1 will be further investigated as this research moves on to the next cycle. The second step of the Meredith cycle will be action research based, using the results presented in this paper to facilitate training and use creative, inclusive and engaging techniques to drive forward and facilitate operational improvement.

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