

# [Continuous improvement in the hospitality industry essay examples](https://assignbuster.com/continuous-improvement-in-the-hospitality-industry-essay-examples/)

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One of the fundamental concepts for high performance service in the hospitality industry is the practice of continuous improvement (King and Cichy, 2006, p. 41). Continuous improvement is a concept first applied to business by Dr. W. Edwards Deming, who was aiding in rebuilding the Japanese business structure after its defeat in World War II (Bhuiyan and Baghel, 2005). Continuous improvement, also known by the Japanese word kaizen, is a business adaption of an attitude commonly found in Japanese culture, which seeks to make sure everything runs as smoothly as possible. Continuous improvement as a business philosophy describes an approach where all factors involved in the business are improved on a constant basis. Under continuous improvement, both management and labor seek to find and eliminate waste in all processes (Inman, 2013). Several foundational business practices are needed for successful adoption of this approach. The first is that there needs to be a method for admission and discussion of the existence of problems without blame or ramifications to the employee. The second is that there is a collaborative process available for formulating solutions for the problems with appropriate delegation of the effort involved. Third, there is true promotion of a continuous role for training and employee improvement at all levels (Inman, 2013). By including these three primary foundational practices, a business can implement continuous improvement.
Admission of the existence of problems, followed by rational, collaborative discussion of possible solutions, is not an easy thing to achieve in an organization. Unfortunately, without safe processes in place for these interactions, such discussions will commonly devolve into blaming the employee who brought up the issue, responsibility off-loading to others, denial of the issue or other defensive responses. For effective continuous improvement there must be a means of airing issues within the organization while subduing the defensive responses that occur. To help avoid these issues, Tidd, Bessant, and Pavitt suggest the approach of a problem solving cycle, where both management and employees understand this is the process that is going to be followed (2005). The first two steps of the cycle involve identifying the issue and defining it. These two steps are what would occur during the first foundational practice described above, however it is adopted within the organization. It is important to note that this process has both narrowing and broadening aspects, where the issue is expanded upon during the discussion.
In practice, identifying the issue can take many different forms, depending on the needs or approach of the organization. One method that has been successful in the hospitality industry is the use of incidence forms (King and Cichy, 2006, p. 77). Incidence forms are filled out when a problem has been encountered by a customer or an employee. These will include description of the problem as well as details on the what, when, and why aspects of the problem. For example, if a customer complains about a noisy air-conditioner within their room, this situation could be the subject of an incidence form. The goal of incidence forms is to identify problems within the organization and record them so a meaningful discussion about possible solutions can be had. They are also useful in tracking problems so that recurring ones, such as noisy air conditions in multiple rooms, can be allocated more immediate attention than those that are less common or single-type incidents. A reduction in incidence reports could also be seen as a sign that the continuous improvement process is functioning within an organization.
The materials from incidence reports would ideally next go to a group of people whose mission is to improve the quality of the service provided by the organization. The next step is to define the problem, as neither incidents or suggests actually define the problem, but only identify it. Larger hospitality organizations have approached this step using a dedicated quality team, although membership on a quality team can be a subset of the responsibilities of a select group of management and employees in smaller ones (King and Cichy, 2006, p. 77). The goal of this step in the problem-solving process is to separate the outward problem identified from the underlying problem that needs solution. Defining the problem could also involve narrowing the focus to smaller sub-problems that need attacking (Tidd, Bessant, and Pavitt, 2005). For example, the air-condition noise issue could be a maintenance problem or it could be a facilities aging problem or perhaps both. By defining the problem well, there is a greater chance that an effective solution will be found and improvement of the organization’s service will result. This is also possibly the stage where the person who will take responsibility for the problem can be identified, as it is important that issues be delegated to the correct level and there be ownership of the problem by someone such that a solution will result (Tidd, Bessant, and Pavitt, 2005).
The next two steps in the problem-solving cycle are exploring ways of solving the problem and selecting which solution or solutions are to be implemented (Tidd, Bessant, and Pavitt, 2005). These parts of the cycle implicate the second foundational practice of continuous improvement, namely, the collaborative process for formulating solutions (Inman, 2013). Exploring ways to solve the problem is expansive, where tools such as brainstorming or other group idea-gathering processes are used. The goal of this step is to get as many possible solutions as possible. So returning to the noisy air-conditioner problem possible solutions could include more insulation in the housing or training the maintenance personnel to be more sensitive to noise levels when making repairs. Maybe higher quality replacement parts are needed to reduce the noise level. Or maybe the maintenance cycle needs to be shortened or more maintenance personnel hired. Maybe customers should be given ear plugs. Further possibilities include replacement of the air conditioner itself or perhaps better scheduling of equipment replacement. Each of these possible solutions should be explored and recorded in order to take the process to the next step.
That next step is the selection of the most promising solution to try, which is essentially the reverse of the exploring stage. The group needs to focus on what they believe is the most likely way to successfully address this problem that is within the scope of the resources available. For example, replacing the air conditioner will likely solve the problem, but that action may not be within facilities’ current budget. Once a likely and realistic solution is picked, the person who was identified as owning this issue will oversee implementation of the solution. Following proper continuous improvement approaches, the implementation will be delegated appropriately within the organization. The owner of the problem will also be responsible for evaluating the result and returning to the quality team with the results. This evaluation and reporting function is necessary to close the loop of the problem-solving cycle (Tidd, Bessant, and Pavitt, 2005). It could be that the solution brought with it other issues for the organization. If the solution of better insulation is selected, it is possible that the maintenance team is not trained in the installation of the insulation and because of safety concerns special training is needed, thus training needs to be scheduled and paid for before this before the solution can be implemented.
In this case, the solution implicates the third foundational practice of continuous improvement, the need for training and the support of management for that training (Inman, 2013). It is common in business for management to be verbally very supportive of training and other employee enrichment programs. However, at the time of actually scheduling and paying for such training, problems will arise. Therefore, it is important to understand that to foster real continuous improvement management must be willing to accommodate the aspects of this philosophy that make business more difficult, such as arranging work schedules to allow for further training and the cost of paying for it. So in the air conditioning example, if further insulation of the air conditioning unit is the selected solution, the mere fact that proper training in the handling and installation of insulation is required in order to implement that solution should not be the sole reason for not taking that action. After all, this is not the first noisy air conditioner in the organization and it will not be the last one either, so in the long run the ability to provide an in-house solution to a recurring issue may make the most sense. This could be true not only in a continuous improvement point of view, but also from an economic point of view as well, which is a common main driver for organizations before they commit to following the continuous improvement approach.
Although this specific example of a noisy air-conditioner has aspects that are admittedly unrealistic, there is one characteristic of this example that is a real part of continuous improvement during actual practice. That is the necessary realization that continuous improvement is a philosophy that results in small, incremental changes that can be difficult to see if some sort of metrics, or measurement method, is not applied to review the process over time (King and Cichy, 2006, p. 120). One possible metric suggested above is a reduction in the amount of incidence forms filed. Another possible metric suggested by the experience of an American athletic club (gym) is the use of satisfaction surveys for both customers, considered external customers, and staff, considered internal customers (King and Cichy, 2006, p. 135). Because the changes involved with continuous improvement can be small, the overall satisfaction rate can be a good way at looking at the cumulative impact of many small changes. This allows management to recognize that all the small solutions are adding up to a measurable positive impact on customer and staff experience.
When applied to a service industry, the principle area where continuous improvement can have its greatest impact is on people and the processes they perform, with an ultimate goal of eliminating wasted time and energy (Hanna, 2007). Once the three foundational practices discussed above for continuous improvement are in place, it is possible to turn to how the work is being accomplished as the primary focus of the continuous improvement process. These kinds of changes may involve much larger problems and much larger changes than those discussed in relation to smaller specific problems discussed above where continuous improvement was developed as a general approach. One overarching organizational area of improvement could be a goal to adopt more lean practices in how the work is done. In view of achieving such a goal, there are four rules that have been adapted from the Toyota Production System to the service industry. Toyota Production System is an example of a highly evolved “ lean” business practice in the manufacturing sector that includes continuous improvement. The four adapted rules are as follows:
“ 1. All work shall be highly specified as to content, sequence, timing, and outcome.
2. Every customer-supplier connection must be direct, and there must be an unambiguous yes or no way to send requests and receive responses.
3. The pathway for every service or product must be simple and direct.
4. Any improvement must be made in accordance with the scientific method, under the guidance of a teacher, at the lowest level possible in the organization.” (Hanna, 2007).
In these four rules, the expression of continuous improvement is found in the fourth rule. In theory, application of these rules to a service industry will provide the same advantages that the lean business approach has provided to the manufacturing industry.
In an attempt to apply these first three rules to a service organization, one tool that will be invaluable is the use of flow charts (Tidd, Bessant, and Pavitt, 2005). Flow charts diagram the activities in a process. As inefficient or ineffective processes are the primary source of waste in a service industry, having the ability to communicate about processes and changes within these processes is essential to remedy this waste, and flowcharts are the means to do this. Analyzing processes for efficiency involves taking the following steps. It starts with examination of the present process (Hanna, 2007). This can be done by through a discussion with staff members or perhaps through observation. Even the most efficient staff will likely have areas within the current procedures that can be improved. Also, it may be useful to scan the incident reports to see if there are areas related to cleaning that are showing up repeatedly in the reports. If that is the case, this could be a time to focus the procedure such that those areas are overlooked less often. In this way, the goals of continuous improvement can be merged with an overall review of work processes.
The next step in adopting more lean practices involves building the ideal process (Hanna, 2007). For example, the housekeeping staff should have a set sequence that they use to clean a room that is being turned over to a new guest. The process may begin with entering the room and opening the drapes and turning on lights to increase the chance of seeing all cleaning problems. This is followed by a check for any special items that need to be returned such as cribs that should be placed in the hallway for return. Then all bottles and cans and soiled glasses are collected. Steps would continue from there, focusing on cleaning a room with as few unnecessary steps as possible, both in the process and physically for the housekeeping staff themselves. Once an efficient process is developed, there will need to be training provided to the staff to implement it. It is important for the staff to understand why the changes are being made, which can involve the communication of a change vision that will express the ultimate goal of the changes (Kotter, 2012, p. 72). In this case, it could be, these process changes are to improve the cleanliness of the rooms in our facility and decrease the time spent turning rooms over for newly arrived guests. Another important aspect of this process will be two-way communication between management and employees, as the staff may have valuable suggestions on how the process could be improved and involving them in this could greatly increase the chances that the changed process will be actually practiced (Kotter, 2012, p. 100). Ultimately, the goal would be a more uniform approach to room cleaning that increases the chances of superior cleanliness and complete readiness for the next guest without wasted housekeeping work time.
One of the greatest drawbacks to applying a philosophy like continuous improvement onto an organization is that successful application will necessarily involve at least some organization change. Change will be involved both in the initial application of the continuous improvement program but also, as each problem is encountered and dealt with within the program framework. If a broad problem is recognized, the change involved will be broad as well. Organizational change is difficult and will invariably involve negative reactions (Connor, 2006). However, it is management’s responsibility to recognize and acknowledge the risk of negative reactions whenever possible in order to reduce their impact on the change process and to grow commitment to the change. Growing commitment for the change rather than enforcing it through authoritative power or other punitive means decreases the risk of disruption to the organization in making the changes (Connor, 2006).
In Connor’s view, support for a change goes through three phases: preparation, acceptance, and finally, commitment (2006, pp. 149-155). The first step of preparation involves contact with the upcoming change and awareness of what is likely to be involved (Connor, 2006, p 149). Communicating the change vision discussed above is part of the preparation stage. However, mere awareness does not mean understanding and treating employees as if they understand the change too quickly is a sure way of derailing the change process. It is possible for organizations to rush through this stage with the end result of negative perceptions and more risk to the organization (Connor, 2006, p. 155). The next stage of growing commitment is acceptance and this involves an understanding of the change and a positive perception or negative perception of the change (Connor, 2006, p. 150-51). It is at the understanding step that employees now have enough information to judge about the change. This is where employees can be asked for input, as discussed above. If the majority of the perceptions are positive or, at least the aspects of the change that they value the most are positive, there is an increased possibility of committing to the change and initiating it (Connor, 2006, p. 151). On the other hand, if the majority of the aspects of the change are seen as negative, the outcome will be true, ingrained resistance to the change (Connor, 2006, p. 151). Thus, achieving commitment to the change by the employees is the goal and through this the organization will gain the rewards of a leaner business approach. Process overhauls such as the one described could be a significant positive result of the adoption of the continuous improvement philosophy.
The hospitality industry can reap many benefits of the adoption of a continuous improvement business philosophy. One method of implementing this approach is to start with incidental problems that are identified within the organization as reported on incidence forms. These problems can be put into a problem-solving cycle that involves the work of a quality team, who would explore the problem, brainstorm solutions, select a solution for implementation, and delegate putting that solution into practice. Eventually, the results of the solution will be reported and evaluated. In this way, incremental improvements of day-to-day problems could be resolved with a dedicated process. Additionally, continuous improvement could be used to support review of many of the processes within the organization for efficiency and adherence to lean business practice rules. This type of review could have significant impact on the running of the organization. However, with large changes comes the risk of negative impacts on the business. Working to build commitment to the changes does reduce the risk of negative impacts and that the changes will be adopted and the efficiencies realized. In the end, the approach of continuous improvement can be valuable for service industries like the hospitality industry, and developing an effective way to implement this approach, although challenging, holds great promise for both higher customer and staff satisfaction.

## References

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