

## Why You Need to Build a Continuous Improvement Culture



**Continuous improvement (CI) and employee engagement go hand-in-hand because engaged employees strongly believe that their CI-related ideas and actions matter – as long as such input is consistently valued.**

Building a culture of continuous improvement (CI) matters more to the long-term success of your health care organization than you might think. In fact, it could be a critical competitive difference-maker.

Consider the strong correlation between CI and employee engagement. We know anecdotally and through several studies that engaged employees are instrumental to the success of any organization. Organizations in the highest quartile of employee engagement have 21 percent higher profitability and 17 percent greater productivity, [according to Gallup](#). The same study found that workplaces with the highest levels of employee engagement have 70 percent fewer employee safety incidents and (for health care providers) 58 percent fewer patient safety mishaps.

CI and employee engagement go hand-in-hand because engaged employees strongly believe that their CI-related ideas and actions matter – as long as such input is consistently valued. Employees who feel heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work, according to [a study](#) of more than 1,500 business professionals. These engaged and empowered employees will likely be your greatest CI champions.

How do you develop a strong CI culture within your organization? It's not about setting up a specific "Office of

Continuous Improvement” or tasking a few select employees with this responsibility, any more than you’d create an “Office of Employee Engagement.” As with developing employee engagement, nurturing and boosting CI happens through multiple incremental steps, involves the entire workforce, and is supported by senior leadership throughout the organization.

## Getting Top-Level Buy-In

The single greatest contributor toward building a CI culture is gaining full-throated and recurring support from your organization’s top leaders. It shouldn’t be difficult to gain and retain leaders’ attention.

Beyond the distinct financial benefits made possible through CI, consider how having a CI culture sends distinct “you matter” and “you are heard” messages to your patients or customers and employees. CI can help reduce operational expenses, as streamlined processes require less time, effort and resources. CI says to your patients or customers that they are the ultimate arbiter of the quality of your work – a key consideration in today’s era of results-based care compensation. It also says you want an engaged, empowered and motivated workforce, as these are the most important factors to CI success.

There’s also a strong pragmatic component to CI, which is that without it, your employees and the services you provide will be stuck in the past, making your organization far less competitive in the future. According to [a recent report from McKinsey](#), by 2020, 25 percent of the global workforce will either need to find a new job or increase their technological and digital skills, as well as their cross-disciplinary skills in such areas as programming, agile working and adaptability. Can your business afford to have up to one-fourth of its workforce operating with outdated skills?

## Developing a CI Culture

Once you’ve gained vigorous leadership support for having a CI culture, consider gradually adopting some or all of the following 10 CI best practices:

1. **Communicate the “what?”** – Be clear with your workforce on the types of CI benefits you seek. Think broadly, so as not to stifle input, but also provide guidelines to help nurture ideas.
2. **Communicate the “how?”** – Let employees know up-front how their input will be handled, and regularly provide them with updates on their suggestions.
3. **Encourage wide participation** – CI is not limited to title, role or tenure. All employee input is welcome, so long as you take ideas seriously, respond appropriately and follow up accordingly.
4. **Think small** – Several small CI “wins” in aggregate can be just as valuable as a single large CI initiative. For example, how might reorganizing supplies lead to greater employee efficiency?

5. **Think external** – Not every “new” CI idea needs to emanate from your business or industry. Look to best practices in other fields to see what might work well for your own organization.
6. **Think people** – The ultimate beneficiaries of practically all CI benefits are people. When considering CI ideas, think of how this improvement will benefit someone or several people.
7. **Transform weaknesses** – Encourage employees to note things that could be done better and take the extra step to think of ways to improve these weaknesses.
8. **Plan on mistakes** – Not every CI idea is a success, at least not at first. Expect mistakes. Trial and error in CI is often necessary to achieve a greater long-term good.
9. **Communicate frequently and broadly** – Share CI ideas with colleagues from other departments or units as well as with relevant business partners and vendors.
10. **Reward improvements** – Celebrate all CI successes, small and large, and consider providing incentives or rewards to employees who contribute successful CI ideas.

## Conclusion

No large health care organization succeeds without the aggregate contributions of many employees. By building a CI culture, you create a work environment that distinctly values your employees’ ideas by consistently hearing, considering and acting upon them. Who wouldn’t want to work in such an environment, and strive to put their best foot forward? Or be a patient or customer of a quality CI-centric organization? CI-oriented organizations justifiably shine, to the benefit of all who are engaged with them.