

The Improvement Process

Many organisations spend much of their resources on fire-fighting: solving emergencies resulting from errors or other failures. Most of this is wasted, as the problem is not permanently resolved.

Every time a problem occurs, it can be treated in one of two ways - as a problem, which causes concern; or as an opportunity for improvement. Any problem can be turned into an opportunity by using it to investigate and identify, and then to correct, the root causes.

There are three stages to turning problems into improvement opportunities:

☞ First, when a problem occurs, take short term action on the process or activity to contain the effects: either make an adjustment, place temporary controls on the process to detect when the problem recurs, or add an extra step to ensure the problem is corrected. (Within the Quality System, this is defined by Process Control.)

☞ Second, for all products or services that demonstrate the problem, determine the means of disposition - make good the error, or discard the goods. (Within the Quality System, this is defined by Control of Nonconforming Product.)

☞ Finally, and most importantly, investigate the causes of the problem, and determine what action will eliminate it, or at least minimise it. If neither of these is practical, then design additional process controls to detect future episodes of the problem, **before** they cause waste. (Within the Quality System, this is defined by Corrective Action.)

The first two steps are carried out by most companies. However, it is the final step that can ensure a consistent reduction of costs, but which most companies do not complete.

Finagle's Fourth Law: Once a job is messed up, anything done to improve it makes it worse.