

Maintaining Organizational Memories

Most people would agree that it is better to learn from past mistakes than to continually repeat them. Similarly, past successes provide valuable guidelines for future activities — if we can remember them. Unfortunately, the common tendency to look for immediate short-term results often discourages the long-term perspective necessary to assimilate important information from the past and make informed projections regarding the future. To further complicate matters, downsizing activities in many large organizations threaten to disperse the very knowledge base in which the lessons of the past are stored.

Organizational memories are vital natural resources, but they can be easily squandered unless companies recognize the importance of collective memory, both as a source of information and a source of group identity (and hence collective purpose). Companies must create structures to capture the memories which can help evaluate proposals for the future.

Members of the **Council for Continuous Improvement (CCI)** seek to preserve organizational memories both internally and externally. Individual efforts to create “learning organizations” have been shared among CCI members in a special interest group as well as through informal networking. Additional knowledge and tools pertinent to organizational memory are acquired through various CCI presentations and workshops (as documented in the *Proceedings of the Council for Continuous Improvement*). Perhaps most importantly, the very process of communicating with other quality improvement professionals places individual organizations within a historical context — this offers a ready-made memory around which an organization’s unique experiences can collect to form new memories.

Framework for Understanding

A key aspect of organizational memory is shared experience. The ability to share experiences depends in turn on a common point of view. A roadmap that is commonly accepted and understood can provide a basic structure for organizational memory, providing snapshots of where the organization has been while pointing everyone in the proper direction for the continuing journey. Checking progress against the roadmap then becomes a way to reinforce collective consensus. CCI offers such a roadmap for quality initiatives: it is called the Continuous Improvement Implementation System (**CIIS™**).

The CIIS uses a graphical model, depicting the improvement process as a cube with three visible faces identified as target areas for improvement, organizational level, and improvement phases [see Figure 1]. Each face is further subdivided. Target areas are customer satisfaction, processes, and infrastructure. Organizational levels are classified as work unit, department level, and business unit. The model identifies four improvement phases: assess and plan; design and test; deploy; and integrate. With these subdivisions (3 targets x 3 levels x 4 phases), the CIIS model identifies 36 distinct cells, each describing a unique position in the continuous improvement journey.

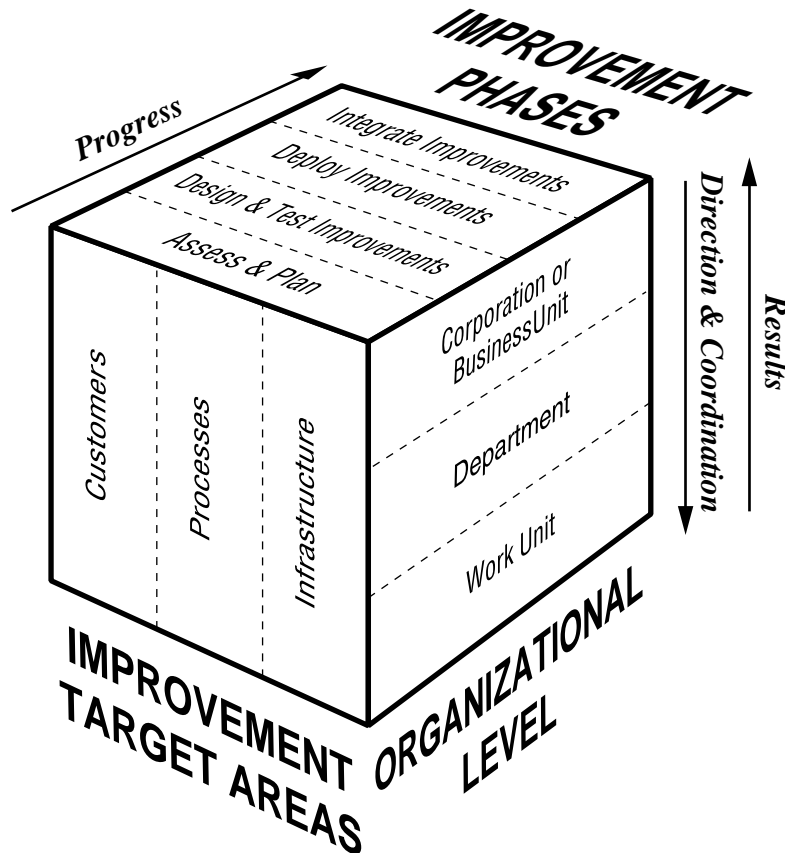


Figure 1

At a recent CCI General Session, CCI Regional Director **Bill Nipp** met with interested members to discuss the CIIS. He pointed out that without integration, the cells in the CIIS cube represent 36 potentially different directions that an organization might pursue. The CIIS model helps align those individual efforts with larger improvement objectives by providing a checklist of tasks, outputs, and measures appropriate for each specific cell.

Mr. Nipp noted that the CIIS model prescribes implementing continuous improvement programs from the top down: from the corporate level through the departmental level down to the work unit. Programs initiated at the work unit level are often like short trips taken to insignificant destinations. However, with proper leadership, results come from the bottom of the cube (the work unit level) and move up. "The target area – our destination – is *customer satisfaction*," Mr. Nipp said. "We have to pass through the 'cities' of *process* and *infrastructure* on our way to that final destination."

To properly read a map, of course, users must be able to identify their current location. With the CIIS roadmap, the system provides a maturity assessment that organizations can use to locate their positions with the cube model. The CIIS Maturity Assessment (CMA) consists of 68 questions about customers, processes, and infrastructure that a company must answer. Based on those answers, the assessment (which is available in both electronic and paper versions) will establish the company's maturity level (position in the cube) and estimate a Baldrige equivalency score. (This is designed to aid in planning and understanding, not as a preparation for the Baldrige Award itself.)

The CIIS also includes a Reference Guide to help users navigate their way through the cube. This guide is a database containing references to over 1000 abstracts describing books, articles, and training materials. Poor scores on the Maturity Assessment (indicating areas of weakness) are referred to the appropriate items in the Reference Guide (this occurs automatically in the electronic version) for further study and improvement.

All the components of the CIIS work together to give everyone in the organization a common vocabulary and a consistent picture of the improvement process in which they are engaged. From this foundation, lasting organizational memories can be built.

Sharing Experiences

An ongoing assessment process like ISO 9000 can be a useful tool for creating the shared experiences which form the building blocks of organizational memory. Working together in preparation for ISO 9000 audits creates shared understanding as well as common memories, and the ISO documentation helps preserve those memories for future workers.

Many CCI members have shared stories of their ISO 9000 certification experiences, but the situation at **Sequel, Inc.** is particularly relevant to the issue of organizational memory. Sequel, a small but significant firm in the disk drive business, was just beginning its drive for ISO 9000 certification when upper management decided to replace middle and first-level management with self-directed work teams. Eliminating those managers might have posed a threat to Sequel's collective memory, but extensive ISO 9000 training for teams and the work of the teams themselves created an entirely new institutional memory.

Dan Cox, internal quality manager at Sequel, delivered a 3-hour class to introduce ISO 9000 to everyone in the company. Team leaders learned the specific ISO 9000 language in special team leader meetings, and they taught the language to their teams. In weekly meetings the teams looked at measurements and identified corrective actions. "The control and management of the quality system is at the team level at Sequel," said **Monte Winters**, vice president of manufacturing technology told CCI members. "The teams did 90% of the work. They did 90% of the audit for us."

Recognizing that they had a strong, well-defined quality system, Sequel looked for ways to demonstrate compliance within their existing documents and practices rather than establishing new documents and practices to meet a literal interpretation of the ISO standards. Like many others seeking ISO certification, they found their problem was not a lack of documentation, but an overabundance. Teams helped identify and eliminate obsolete documents, and they worked to simplify others.

Sequel was certified in compliance with ISO 9001 within a year of their preliminary assessment, suggesting that the transition to self-directed work teams was also successful. Their performance has continued to improve in two successive surveillance audits (performed at regular intervals to ensure ongoing compliance). This indicates not only organizational memory, but organizational learning as well.

Honoring the Memories

Whereas dramatic events like quality audits create strong (if not completely pleasant) memories, recognition events and celebrations reinforce memories with emphatically positive emotions. **Schumacher**, another CCI member company, has institutionalized this process in an annual Quality Day celebration. With a six year history of its own, Schumacher's Quality Day carries the history of their quality movement forward in time.

Mike Halberstadt, quality control manager at Schumacher, a chemical supplier in the semiconductor industry, described the company's policy regarding this event at a recent CCI session. He noted that in their first annual quality plan, Quality Day was designed to recognize the accomplishments of the previous year. "If you are going to take time off once a year to celebrate quality, you'd better have something to celebrate," he emphasized. "It puts pressure on the senior staff to successfully implement quality initiatives that are consistent with the organization's tactical objectives. The president is accountable to every single employee in our company: at Quality Day he reports the status of the action items on the quality plan just completed, and then we introduce the new plan."

According to Mr. Halberstadt, Quality Day helps communicate corporate values to employees, and it has certainly helped establish TQM as a common language among "Schumachians." In this way, the celebratory event becomes part of the infrastructure that promotes organizational memory. Schumacher's first Quality Day consisted of a catered lunch with a keynote speaker and awards, but over the years it grew to include team booths, and in 1993 it became an all-day event.

Barb Giddings, leader of the team responsible for staging the event in 1994, described their efforts for CCI members. The planning and execution took place over a period of seven months, and the result was an event both memorable and educational. The centerpiece of the day's festivities was a scavenger hunt in which interdepartmental teams of Schumachians combed the company's 20 departments collecting a page from the next year's tactical quality goals and having their picture taken with a specific piece of equipment in each department. Instead of a motivational speaker, all departments were given 15 minutes to prepare a 3-minute departmental presentation for the rest of the company; these presentations proved to be quite motivational in their own right.

Schumacher attributes substantial bottom-line business results to their quality improvement efforts, and they believe Quality Day helps sustain the culture that supports quality. Their financial commitment to the event clearly demonstrates the depth of that conviction.

Committed to Memory

In the end, as CCI members know, commitment is everything. Memory is dependent on a context: accepted points of reference and comparison. Unless an organization *commits* to a *context* — whether it's a model, a discipline, or an event — experience remains a sequence of disconnected episodes, like fragments of a dream. We cannot remember them or learn from them if we cannot place them in a context larger than the events of the moment. The specific techniques employed to build organizational memory matter less than the commitment over time to a consistent set of values and principles.