



Frustration-driven process improvement

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Abstract When employees are empowered to continuously record their employment-related frustrations—doing so on accessible, visually prominent media—process improvement becomes upgraded to operate in a truly continuous mode. Frustrations are a superior target of process improvement in that they get at deep-seated concerns of people who have first-order process awareness and are most directly impacted by process failings. Recording frustrations not only provides a sound basis for pressing on to solutions, but it is also cathartic. The act of recording frustrations prominently on company-sanctioned media provides a positive outlet for the frustrations themselves.

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1. Frustration in the workplace

The book *The Enemy of Engagement* expresses its main message in its subtitle: *Put an End to Workplace Frustration—and Get the Most from Your Employees*. According to authors [Mark Royal and Tom Agnew \(2011, p. 31\)](#) of the Hay Group, “frustrated employees make up 20% or more of the workforce of a typical company.” Those 20%, they say, are likely to respond in one of three ways: *break through*, meaning find a way to overcome the frustrations; *break down*, that is, just quit trying; or *break away*, vote with their feet and find other employment, a response more likely for high performers.

Those authors label frustration a silent killer and employ the term enablement to describe what employers should do about it. Their prescriptions revolve around key determinants of workplace frustration that managers should identify and improve.

Here I borrow enablement, but do not restrict its application to 20% of workforces. Rather, frustration-centered enablement should apply to all employees since surely everyone experiences small, medium, or large workplace frustrations every day. With that all-encompassing assumption, this article shifts emphasis. More than what managers need to do to mitigate determinants of frustrations, we look to employees who are obliged to record their own frustrations. This starts the ball rolling toward the elimination of frustrations, while at the same time steering clear of negatively loaded terms (e.g., mistake and error, defects and rejections).

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The individuals doing the recording should do so in ways that are simple and visible so that workmates and others can easily read, ponder, and extrapolate from what they read. Done right, all those recorded frustrations serve as a dynamic store of process knowledge readily accessible at low levels in the organization such that knowledge stocks are transformed in flows of process improvement ideas and their implementation. In the knowledge management (KM) model advanced by Davenport, DeLong, and Beer (1998, p. 43), the frustration records provide information that combines with experience and context, which is available to the maker plus workmates for interpretation and reflection: “a high-value form of information that is ready to apply to decisions and actions.” That knowledge base, and the prospect of continually and widely using it for process improvement, carries with it culture-changing ramifications.

This article centers on process improvement, ideally the continuous kind, and it prescribes use of employee frustrations as a driving force. To some extent this is a new idea, a largely untried way to perpetually tap concerns of work forces in the cause of continuous process change and improvement. As for those terms, Strauss and Corbin (1990, pp. 144, 148) said: “Process is a way of giving life to data by taking snapshots of action/interaction and linking them to form a sequence or series . . . Process is the analyst’s way of accounting for or explaining change.”

But what do we mean by frustrations? And how does process improvement driven by employees recording their frustrations stack up against other approaches that have been advanced over the years?

2. Upgrading the role of the employee in continuous process improvement (CPI)

The adjective continuous often accompanies the term process improvement. However, in practice, process improvement is largely discontinuous: kaizen, Six Sigma, and other irregular, often widely spaced improvement projects. My purpose is to show the way toward truly continuous improvement in which employee-recorded frustrations provide the requisite raw material. Frustrations stem from various conditions, some easily and willingly recorded by employees, others less so. Table 1 attempts to categorize various kinds of frustrations as to type and suitability for the purpose. The five

Table 1. Employee frustrations: A typology

Most appropriate as basis for on-the-job recording

1. Frustrations tied to recordable incidents directly relating to the job:

These are frustrating conditions that prevent the employee (or work team) from doing the job correctly (without error, on time, and so forth). They have to do with workplace factors—including tools, equipment, direct materials, supplies, work space, job instructions, training, utilities, and environmental conditions.

2. Frustrations tied to one’s personal life:

These frustrations can include job demands that impinge on urgencies to care for an infirm family member; being at home to receive a service technician; attending an important play, game or ceremony involving a family member. There are endless other such outside-the-job situations that are made difficult by rigidities of the job.

3. Frustrations in combination with fears:

These can include frustrations relating to fear of speaking up about serious safety, quality, or other issues, and likely or imagined penalties for doing so. Fear over one’s own work-related safety.

Usually not appropriate for on-the job recording

4. Frustrations tied to recordable incidents indirectly relating to the job:

These are frustrating interactions with other employees including workmates, supervisors, quality control, and various functionaries.

5. General aggravations:

Most people harbor these at least some of the time. They can include (to name a few) dissatisfaction with career, pay, and benefits; lack of opportunities for advancement; commuting to work; and food in the cafeteria.

types identified are shown in more detail in Sections 2.1.1.–2.1.5.

2.1. The 5 types of frustrations

2.1.1. Type 1: Relating to the job

Type 1 frustrations—regarding incidents directly relating to one’s job—are the primary target of frustration-driven process improvement. An obvious reason is that they deal with what the employee has been hired for: doing a job. For someone in production, frustrations could cluster around things going wrong in regard to a certain tool (too often missing), machine (can’t hold tolerances), and work-place conditions (too hot). For an appointments clerk or salesperson it might be finding a place to park, or insufficient time to catch up on paperwork. A single such incident has little impact.

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