DON'T JUST DO BEST PRACTICE... THINK!

Jamil Rashid, director of leadership and management mentoring consultants, JARA, explains why best practice doesn't do what it says on the tin and how a genuine understanding of problems is the key to solving them.

There is a tendency to assume that best practice is the answer to everything. In reality, a solution that results from original thought will always be more effective than an off-the-shelf package. But what do we mean by best practice? There are many definitions you could use but, essentially, it is an idea that asserts that there is a technique, method, process, activity, incentive or reward that is more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other: with proper processes, checks and testing, a desired outcome can be delivered with fewer problems and unforeseen complications. Best practice can also be defined as the most efficient (least amount of effort) and effective (best results) way of accomplishing a task, based on repeatable procedures that have proven themselves with time for large numbers of people. So, it can encompass everything from 'the way we've always done it' to widely accepted methodologies that you can read about in any number of management textbooks. And, of course, best practice is not restricted to the business world, it is applied throughout organizations of all types.

Designed to Solve a Particular Problem

The trouble with many best practice techniques is that they nearly always have their origins in solving a particular problem, which may not be as similar as you think to the one you are trying to deal with. Take Lean, for example, which many organizations refer to as 'best practice.' This widely used methodology has its origins in a particular problem that Henry Ford was dealing with (although many would argue that Lean's roots go further back). The company came up with a method to solve it; yet, with time, the method evolved into lots of tools and techniques and everyone forgot what the original problem was.

Today, these 'morphed' tools and techniques are being applied throughout industry, with no reference to the problem they are trying to solve. The people who used them so well in the past needed to solve a problem they really understood. But if you don't understand your own particular problem, these tools and techniques will be of limited benefit, at best. It has to be said that some of the blame for creating the illusion that best practice is the panacea for all ills must rest with consultants. Usually highly trained in best practice tools and techniques, their recommendations to implement things such as Lean, New Product Introduction Procedures and, of course, management training are exactly what their clients expect and perhaps demand. And this is where the rest of the blame lies: managers looking for quick fixes without having to think too hard about the issues or working out how to address them. As well as managers who really do want to work it out, but do not have the necessary skills or who are pressured from above to act quickly or face the consequences.

Problem Solving Shortcut

The fact remains that if you just apply a prescribed solution, you risk bypassing a proper understanding of the problem you are trying to fix. Take a simple example: you've put on weight, you conclude that you need to go on a diet … but do you understand the reasons why the pounds have been piling on? Why exactly are you eating the wrong food? What's really preventing you from getting to the gym? At best, simply applying a best practice solution is a shortcut to problem solving. At worst, it is an avoidance of responsibility and ultimately a waste of resources, to be repeated year on year until or unless the true cause of the problem is identified and fixed. The diet analogy also demonstrates why implementing a best practice solution is so popular: you can be seen to be doing something, whereas spending time trying to understand the problem is less likely to be recognized as being productive.
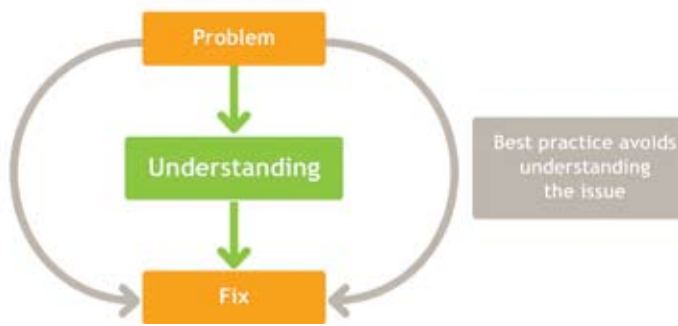
Figure 1: At best, simply applying best practice is a short cut to problem solving
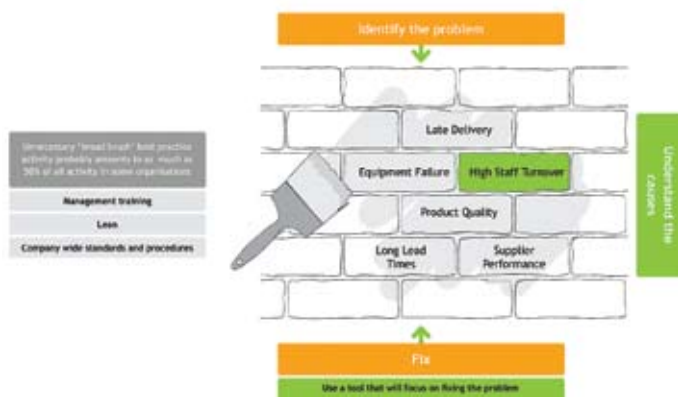

Figure 2: The best practice broad brush

This is probably also why organizations find it hard to directly link best practice initiatives to actual results: it is much easier to talk about actions than outcomes. And it is certainly not unusual to come across managers who, having put failing best practice initiatives in place, then take short-term actions designed to give the impression of success: for example, getting rid of stocks (or worse, people) to salvage a profitability improvement programme that their best practice initiative did not solve.

Easier to Do, Easier to Defend

Make no mistake, it is much easier to 'do best practice' and this is probably at the heart of why we like it so much. Most techniques and methodologies will prescribe a set of instructions to follow, so you don't really have to think too much about it. For instance, the Lean gurus will tell you exactly how to create a Value Stream Map — a recognized business assessment such as EFQM will enable you to tick some boxes to 'put standards in place' and you will have saved a massive amount of time. But does anybody actually use or really stick to these standards and procedures? The answer is likely to be no, simply because they don't know how these actually link to or solve the problem(s) they are trying to deal with. The list of methodologies that are likely to fail for these reasons is almost endless: 360 degree appraisals, Balanced Scorecards, Six Sigma training, ISO and many more.

This is not to say that they never work — they can be very effective, but only when tightly focused on very specific problems, rather than being applied as part of a broad best practice initiative. Best practice is not only easier to do, it is also easier to defend. You are much less likely to be challenged on the implementation of a best practice initiative than something you have devised yourself. It is also easier for the challenger to accept your defence: you might expect a design engineer to know about best practice

programme management techniques, a quality engineer to know about Six Sigma, a sales manager to know about CRM systems — "it's their field and they're experts, I can leave it to them" — so everyone wins.

This real-life example is not untypical: a company starts a Value Stream Mapping initiative (part of the Toyota Production System), implementing pull systems and one-piece flow. But even though the real problem is poor sales, Continuous Improvement specialists focus most of their resources on cost and delivery issues. What they really need to do is help the sales force to sell better, but the general manager is averse to tackling the sales operation because it tends to operate under its own rules. Moreover, the Continuous Improvement people are normally trained to apply specific tools and techniques, rather than making individual managers focus on why they behave in particular ways.

Closed Mind Culture

Even more crucial to understand is the negative impact of an over-reliance on best practice. There is, undoubtedly, a huge amount of best practice activity going on within business today that is unnecessary: project managers undergoing broad brush skills training (not focused on well-defined skills gaps linked to performance shortfalls), managers on management training, IT people implementing SAP across the board and not focusing on the key issues that really need fixing. This unnecessary activity amounts, I suggest, to an average of 20% of all activity in every organization, but probably as much 50% in some. And this means waste: people doing (and being trained to do) the wrong things and spending a huge amount of cash in the process.

Another negative impact is frustration. Mutterings of "Oh no, not another new initiative, here we go again" are heard the length and breadth of business and industry, because people get tired of initiatives not being seen through, or indeed thought through, by managers. Sadly, this means that getting buy-in for genuinely valuable initiatives is difficult because resistance builds up with time. I have assembled teams on many occasions to start an improvement project and, even before I have explained what it is about, I can see the glazed looks in front of me. Unfortunately, best practice promotes a closed mind culture: "They already have the answer, they're just pretending to involve me." Above all, best practice stops managers managing. It stops them defining the problem they want to fix, based on detailed analysis, and encourages the setting of very general objectives that will not deliver the required result.

Understand Your Problem

If best practice is not the answer, what should managers be doing instead?
• Spending more time thinking about the problem(s) they face. Undoubtedly. In fact, probably ten times more than they normally would, because 90% of fixing a problem lies in truly understanding it.
• Making sure they are fixing the right problem: the one that the business really needs to address. It is vital to the success of any organization that every key action can be traced back to its strategic objectives, because if people do not understand the vision and their role in realizing it, they cannot check whether what they are doing is aligned with it. So, they waste energy on a large number of unnecessary tasks, fail to complete valid projects and ignore key actions altogether.

Example: We recently interviewed a potential consultant who made an impressive presentation about an improvement initiative in manufacturing that he had implemented at a previous company, involving multifunctional teams, an organization-wide key performance indicators system, 'traffic light' reporting and so on. The project delivered improvements in product

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packaging, quality and upgradeability, but when asked what impact it had had on the business, the candidate had to admit that the company was in administration owing to a drop in sales from $70 to $30 million! The solution? Analyse the reasons behind the problem. Companies consistently fail to change the behaviours that cause poor performance because they do not measure them.

Example: A business grappling with high levels of staff turnover was relying on 'gut feeling' and employee feedback, which had suggested the root of the problem to be a lack of career development opportunity. But deeper analysis by the team revealed that people who had received more development and training than others were just as likely to leave. What they discovered was that the values of the employees who had left were not aligned to those of the business, because values hadn't been tested as part of the recruitment process or subsequently tackled by managers. The solution, therefore, lay in making changes regarding how people were assessed and reviewed, not in providing training or career opportunities. The take-home message was getting the teams to understand the problem and come up with its own solution. Even when the manager understands a problem really well, if 100 people have to implement a solution, they need to be given time to really understand the logic of why they are doing it or any short-term wins will simply not be sustained. The only way to

ensure that people take ownership of the solution is to make them create it themselves as a result of their own analysis.

Example: A company was overspending its budget on new product development programmes by more than £2 million. The Managing Director knew that the engineering management team could make significant reductions in this overspend by simply managing in a more structured way. So, to fix the problem, he commissioned a New Product Development process (which cost more than £1 million to implement). Standards and procedures were implemented everywhere, but most of the staff didn't really use them, so cost performance didn't improve. The initiative failed because the team didn't really see the link between the new processes and 'the real issues' they faced. The solution? Developing highly visible plans that really demonstrate what needs to be done, why, how and by whom to achieve the key milestones of the solution. This means establishing and linking structured, detailed and easily followed plans and review procedures at every level, ensuring that everyone plans in the same way, in accordance with clear rules, and encouraging team members to support each other in maintaining consistent high quality planning. So, managers need to understand the problem in detail and its impact on the business as a whole, to involve their teams in understanding the problem too, to help them create the solution and to apply rigid controls to follow that solution through.

Role of Leaders

As you would expect, leaders have a critical role to play. They should not be there merely to commission best practice initiatives or tools, they are there to create discipline and behavioural boundaries; in other words, to set the rules that will enable success. For example, all key activities must show clear links to strategy, all key decisions must be based on hard data and analysis (not assumption and gut feeling) and all key activities must be planned in detail. Leaders need to create the management structure in which these rules are applied and an environment in which teams understand the issues and can be helped to manage the implementation of the solution. But, they must be careful not to prescribe the solution or the tools to be used to fix it! They need to let people make mistakes so that they can learn when they are stepping outside the behavioural boundaries (like parents helping children to learn from their mistakes, it can be hard to do!). Simply letting people make mistakes and having no structure to help them understand and learn from what went wrong is next to useless. It is not good enough to say "we encourage people to learn from mistakes" and just hope they do.

Which is why leaders also need to ask the right questions. Are people clear on why they are doing what they are doing? Are managers really involving their teams? How are you measuring your activities? How are you linking these to your goals? Have you planned in sufficient detail? Ironically, this article could be construed as expounding a best practice methodology! In fact, it is intended to help to prevent you falling into the best practice trap rather than give you best practice 'fixes.' Hopefully the message is clear though — you need to think: come up with your own solution, stick to it, follow it through and above all really get the best out of your people. Don't let them and the organization down by dishing up best practice on a plate. **Pharma**