

The concept of finding best practices and then implementing them is like motherhood and apple pie: Who could disagree? However, actually getting it done can remain a pipedream for many companies; and when it does happen, often it is poorly executed. Why is implementing “lessons learned” so hard? What do we have to do differently and is there a formula to make our efforts more successful?

The Primary Obstacles

In any business environment, people

like to be in control and to operate within a comfort zone of knowing what is going on and how to handle whatever challenges arise. Change is universally resisted (for both good and bad reasons); therefore, effectively implementing a “lessons learned” or read-across strategy to share successful methodologies with other plants within the company is often resisted because it is asking people to change. Primary obstacles include:

- **Insufficient need for change.** The new idea may be good, but the

current method is not “broken,” so therefore, why fix it?

- **Lack of adequate understanding.** The new idea is a clever concept, but it won't create that much of a difference.
- **Looks like too much work.** Making the change may mean a total overhaul of the way you do things, and if it doesn't work you will have wasted too much time and effort.
- **Fear of failure.** What if it doesn't work or doesn't work here?

A FORMULA FOR SHARING LESSONS LEARNED

Don't let that next great idea fall victim to the universal tendency to resist change. By following this proven read-across process, you can successfully share best practices across plants in a strategic system for growth and improvement.



A Formula for Sharing Lessons Learned

Top 10 Keys to an Effective Read-Across System

1. Top management's direct engagement into the inventory of great ideas.
2. A routine process to review the best practices with a significant deployment group.
3. A well-respected expert that can filter good ideas from the others and can help explain the necessary elements of the implementation activity.
4. An accurate method to estimate the value of the implemented good idea—especially into annual dollar value.
5. For each good idea, there is a passionate implementation leader—a “convert” that can enthusiastically describe the way it was and how the new way is better.
6. Easily accessible file of lessons with the value and tips for implementation.
7. A method that creates an “aha” moment for the receiving operation and its people.
8. A reward system that motivates people to make some changes and try things out.
9. Local operating freedom that allows the receiving plants to prioritize the changes that have the most immediate impact and the ability to defer or pilot the ideas that seem to have limited local utility.
10. A simple and visible method to track implementation and sustainability.

■ **Negative or non-inertia.** The incentive to sustain the status quo is greater than the incentive to change.

■ **“Not Invented Here” syndrome.** If it's not your idea, it can't be better. In looking at read across, accept the fact that real, hard-working people who have great pride in their jobs experience nearly all of these concerns every day. It is not that they are not motivated, or that they are lazy or that they don't care; it's just that these concerns are so universally felt. So, how do you change this atmosphere?

Let me describe a scenario with the elements to make a read-across process work. Imagine during a plant visit, the “boss executive” notices a huge change in an operating method that was yielding some significant returns. The people are proud, they are fired up and they know that they have a much better method. The executive sees the results in the performance metrics and recognizes the people for the improvement. In the process, the executive notices a rather enthusiastic group that is quite proud of its accomplishments and wants to capture the spirit of the team as well as the method. Therefore, the executive begins searching for a way to transfer the knowledge to other company plants.

The Catalyst

Most of the time, the executive would contact someone he trusts that knows more about the new method and would ask that expert to visit this “island of progress” and verify that the ideas are solid and the gains are sustainable and repeatable. Once the expert gets on site and confirms that the better process is solid, the search begins for the key elements that make it successful. The expert knows that usually improvements can be rolled up into tangible results such as quality, cost and prof-

its—in fact, the true expert can accurately determine the value of a great new idea. They take the time to write down the key features and implementation steps, and in short order, the expert can define a fairly comprehensive business case for the new idea in terms of costs and benefits, as well as the most likely locations within the corporation that could benefit from the better idea.

Also present at the best practice site are people who are really proud of their accomplishment. They are turned on to the idea because they know it works. In fact they are so turned on, they almost become evangelists for the idea. The new idea makes their lives better, and they are motivated to share it.

With this knowledge, the process sharing usually begins when the expert visits the sister plants and explains how the new method could help. For the recipient plants, the new idea is usually met with the resistance to change. All the objections begin to surface, and a “missionary journey” is needed to allow the recipient plant's people to see the new method for themselves. If the visit is successful, the recipient plant people go through a metamorphosis or a significant “aha!” moment. This moment of realization is critical. The recipients of the new process must be convinced that the new method is better and that it will fill a need that they have.

In addition, the best read-across processes include a multitude of ideas for implementation, as well as freedom for the recipient plant(s) to custom tailor the idea to its local situation. They need some freedom in the selection process of which ideas to implement as well as some control of the timing. The customization is essential. The plant personnel receiving the idea usually need to place a stamp of accomplishment on their implementation, similar to an artist signing his work. Giving the implementer(s) the freedom to make these modifica-



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Formula for Sharing

tions not only increases commitment to the implementation success, but also it provides a method to achieve new heights and to raise the state of the art.

The Reinforcement

To make the read-across process solid, the top executive must monitor and support the recipient team in the implementation process. Smart executives will require a certain amount of change from each plant on an annual basis. These leaders will challenge the experts to find an accessible place to store all the great new ideas (like a corporate shared drive) in a consistent business-case format.

If the total inventory of read-across ideas in the shared drive amounts to \$2.5 million worth of savings to a “recipient plant,” the smart executive would establish an achievable goal for each plant to copy a certain percentage (20-30 percent or \$500,000-\$750,000) worth of new ideas into the plant on an annual basis and monitor the implementation of the transferable ideas. It's also a good idea to create a simple and visual monitoring device and schedule the review of the implementation in normal business planning meetings.

It is easiest for the executive to have a visual management tool to monitor implementation progress. What's best is a simple chart that shows the ideas and their implementation status. What most companies miss are the criteria to monitor the implementation. The change can be seen as natural steps that are trackable, and the best ones have clearly defined phases with tangible criteria. For example:

Step 1. *Plant management commitment* on a business plan to implement the idea with a local champion assigned to coordinate the development.

Step 2. *Champion with a support team* that has visited the best practice site with a documented implementation plan approved by plant management.

Step 3. *Implementation of the idea* in a pilot location with a minimum of 30 days actual use and documentation of the new system's benefits.

Step 4. *Duplication in at least two other pilot areas* with minimum 30 days use and documented benefits reviewed and approved by an “expert.”

When these steps are taken, the duplication of ideas generally flows throughout the plants. A spirit of controlled change envelops the people, and “results multiplication” begins. This carefully thought-out process defeats many of the original obstacles. The freedom to choose, modify and establish intelligent timing helps the plant personnel feel a greater degree of control. The annual expectation level tells the people that controlled change is expected, and the lack of understanding or the concept of “too much work” will melt under the magnifying glass of expectations. Viewing read-across as a system, the need for the support mechanisms is clear. The key to success is not in the pushing and hoping; rather, it is in establishing a complete operating activity that is blended into the daily operating practices. ➤

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