



# Want to Reach New Levels of Operational Excellence? Give Frontline Workers the Floor.



The quest for operational excellence is never ending. But when continuous improvement programs fall short, disappointing results usually circle back to the fact that the changes were not owned by the frontline. Give them the floor and watch what happens.

Operational excellence leads organizations to grow and gain a competitive advantage - but to drive growth and stay ahead of the competition, you need results. To get results requires continuous improvement. However, top-down strategy is missing the mark. You need to invert the pyramid. The key to driving continuous improvement and implementing your strategy for achieving OPEX starts on the floor - with your frontline workers.

## Changing the “us against them” mentality



For many frontline workers, the job is just that. They generally adhere tightly to their job description of “running the machines.” In return, they expect safe working conditions, scheduled breaks, and a fair wage.

When a problem arises, falling back on the well-worn path is the default. If it's a minor machine issue, they apply a few standard fixes - like adjusting the calibration in order to keep things moving. If that doesn't work, the problem is escalated to the next level, which usually involves maintenance and/or engineering personnel. Production may be halted until the cause can be identified, they find a contingent workaround, or the problem is solved.

Upstairs, questions are being asked about product quality, production rates, and the ability of workers on the floor to resolve issues faster and more efficiently. After all, they are the ones running the equipment. Shouldn't they know how to solve a problem?

## Today's problems are tougher to fix

As organizations look for ways to improve productivity and save money, automation is increasingly invading the work environment, operating with a much leaner workforce.

Frontline workers are frequently recruited based on attitude rather than industry experience, and they are thrown into the job where machines largely operate themselves. Performance trends and alarms are monitored on screens from control rooms. The equipment troubleshoots itself and sends data to vendors to enable remote and predictive support. Under normal conditions, the plant runs itself.

At the same time, the demands on frontline workers grow heavier. They are being asked to do more with less - and do it faster. 24/7 is the mantra. They are expected to absorb more technical information and decipher data to solve issues quicker.

But today's problems can't be solved using old-world tactics, and frontline workers are often simply not equipped to resolve the issues of the modern workplace.

## Why you want ninja problem-solvers on the floor

Where are things most likely to break down? On the production floor - where your frontline workers are in the best position to spot problems first. They know how your equipment is supposed to be performing. They will notice trends that indicate there is a potential issue brewing such as lower output rates, increased defects and/or declining trends in machine performance.

Unfortunately, noticing an issue isn't enough. Workers need to be able to assess the cause of the problem or see it through to a resolution. If they don't know how to do this, chances are the issue will be escalated, take longer to solve and cost more than necessary in resources and lost productivity.



Frontline workers must be trained in problem-solving and be empowered to resolve issues on the floor. The key lies in equipping them to be observant and fact-based, and able to take action based on what is known rather than “this is what we always do when this happens.” They need to move from observation to gathering relevant data points using a structured process.

The closer one can get to the source of the problem, the better the chances are of resolving it quickly and inexpensively. Which of these shortens the distance between problem and solution?

#### **Scenario #1**

*We had rejects last night. Please send an engineer to take a look.*

#### **Scenario #2**

*Our chief product has an issue. We noticed scratches across the panel on lines 1 and 3, but not on line 2. The issue began at 7 am, and was first identified at the last work station.*

As the first ones on the scene, your frontline workers can play a crucial role in increasing your product quality, preventing rejects, minimizing damages and halting deterioration of a situation before it causes potential calamity.

## **Tap into frontline strengths with a team approach**

Frontline employees are your strength in numbers. Many of them are highly experienced with a long tenure running the line. Most rely on skills acquired over time to address issues on the job. They have developed impressive capabilities to resolve issues to keep the line going but lack specific processes to solve problems and make decisions regarding appropriate actions.

You can tap into their knowledge and innate desire to help by creating teams, often called [high performance teams](#), and empowering workers to take on a role in continuous improvement for your organization.



Just as a call center has different levels of support, so too should the shop floor. This is what a frontline team might look like:

### **Level One - Operators**

Your operators are the “heavy lifters” who monitor alarms, contain the issue and suggest next actions. They gather facts and build accurate problem statements based on their observations at the source of the problem before evidence changes.

### **Level Two - Team Leaders**

Team leaders are the team coaches. Each team leader has a specific area of responsibility such as quality control, communication and material delivery. They are the go-to people for operators depending on the issue. Team leaders verify actions, and identify alternate solutions when things are a little more complex. Like operators they play a key role in monitoring for recurrence and raising the alarm when a problem has not been addressed appropriately.



### **Level Three - Subject Matter Experts**

These are maintenance people and engineers who have the level of technical skill to resolve the complex issues or are able to secure the resources who do.

## **The benefits of empowering frontline workers**

- Saves time and money - problems are solved faster
- Preserves evidence before it disappears - reduces the need to start over with each new incident
- Smoother handoffs of problem-solving efforts if the issue needs to be escalated
- Prevents potential problems before they grow into serious, more expensive ones
- Supports CI goals by maximizing the knowledge and experience of the people on the frontline
- Allows engineers and managers to direct time and energy to more difficult issues
- Lowers attrition rates - keep solid employees who are engaged and feel valued
- Creates a career path for frontline workers - provide opportunities for upward mobility of people who know and understand the equipment

## **Training tactics for the frontline**

Traditional training calls for pulling workers off the floor for hours or even days to attend training sessions that overwhelm them with one-size-fits-all content.

But with fewer people on the floor, taking workers away from their jobs won't increase productivity. Overloading them with more information than they can retain won't improve safety, production or quality. Time-intensive, in-classroom education simply doesn't always make sense for the new work environment.

So how do you equip your frontline employees with the knowledge and the tools they need to see big results?

### **Start small - with microlearning tactics**



Microlearning is bite-sized or easily digestible focused learning that is accessed by the learner as needed. It's particularly effective when learners don't have the time or attention span for formal training. Procedures and work guides are segmented by topic, and easily accessible on a computer or mobile device. Short, memorable how-to videos are viewed for quick reference.

Many organizations are leveraging microlearning as a critical component of their operational excellence strategies - whether it's to reduce safety incidents, increase production quality, teach problem-solving techniques or ensure consistency from team to team.

### **Provide opportunities to learn by doing**

The key for frontline training is to make it relevant to workers and let them practice what they've learned. Teach minimum work-related concepts and provide ample time to practice in a safe work setting, or a risk-free environment with simulation devices and gamification elements that make it fun and memorable.

### **Coach them to be high performers**

Establish clear expectations and set the stage for success. Observe their performance on the floor and provide pinpointed feedback. Watch for workers doing something right. Ask them why they are doing it this way, encourage them and give them confidence.

[The problem is there are not enough workers with the right skills to fill the roles of the modern environment—and the gap is widening at an alarming rate.](#)

### **Inverting the pyramid in the quest for OPEX**

Progress moves at a glacial pace and sometimes not at all when change initiatives come from the top.

When continuous improvement programs fail, the disappointing results often tie back to the fact that the changes were not owned by the frontline. That's because while those who develop company standards and procedures may know how things are done in theory, frontline workers know how things are done in practice.



Management-led initiatives often do not capture ideas for improvement that frontline employees have. When only a small portion of the workforce is consulted for a company-wide effort, the rest feel disengaged, and consequently provide very little support for new initiatives. This makes it difficult to build a culture of continuous improvement.

If the pyramid is inverted, and frontline workers are allowed to take the lead in CI initiatives, the program stands a greater chance of being acted on day after day.

## Elements of success for line-led OPEX



### **Empower frontline workers as problem-solvers**

Teach them to identify and prioritize problems and changes, and they will be energized by the opportunity. Give them a chance to identify what stands in the way of excellence and then work together to remove those barriers.



### **Help employees understand their value**

Explain how workers fit into reaching the next level of performance. For example, a 99% reliability rate is clearer than the goal of being a "world-class company." Why should employees care if they don't understand the impact or value they are bringing to the organization?



### **Set reasonable goals**

If the targets are perceived as being too high, workers will feel defeated before they begin. Set attainable goals or performance levels that can be reached and celebrated.



### **Use a carrot instead of a stick**

Unmet goals or problems can always be attributed to something - not someone. Engage workers in helping to uncloud the situation and reward them for success rather than making them pay for failure. Relate success to company value. For example, explain how solving a problem saved the company \$25,000.



### **Create a knowledge base**

As frontline workers leave the company, so too do years of accumulated operational knowledge. Initiate a formal system that preserves that knowledge for future teams and workers. This enables new employees to perform at higher levels faster.



### **CI must be owned company-wide**

From the frontline teams to leaders, the program must be owned and respected by all. If frontline teams feel that they are not being taken seriously by management, enthusiasm will quickly wane, the program will trail off, and staff will return to the old way of doing things.

Fortunately, the mentality that frontline workers should "just run the machine" is shifting. Company leaders expect workers to take a more active role in problem-solving, be more proactive in learning and skill development, and take responsibility for the organizational impacts resulting from operations on the floor.

What's more, leaders are recognizing that frontline workers can be **the vehicle** to the implementation of a company's pursuit of operational excellence.

How will you set them up for success?

### **How a paper manufacturer worked out the wrinkles and saved \$0.5M**

A paper company was experiencing creasing of the paper on one machine. The issue was intermittent and had been around for many years. Each time, the problem was corrected by temporary work-arounds. Finally, the creasing became significantly worse, costing the company in lost productivity, paper waste and product sales. A permanent solution was required.

Workers built a detailed picture of the problem through observations across several shifts, and identified exactly where in the manufacturing cycle the creasing was occurring. Close studies of two paper machines during this critical point identified key equipment for testing.

The cause was a faulty pressure gauge that, even though it displayed the correct pressure reading, was actually applying incorrect pressure to the product.

The creasing was eliminated to 0 and the solution avoided proposed repairs that would have cost the company \$0.5M.

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To learn more about how to organize your organization for operational success [contact us](#) to set up a conversation with any of the contributing writers.

## **About Kepner-Tregoe**

Kepner-Tregoe is the leader in problem-solving. For over six decades, Kepner-Tregoe has helped thousands of organizations worldwide solve millions of problems through more effective root cause analysis and decision-making skills. Kepner-Tregoe partners with organizations to significantly reduce cost and improve operational performance through problem-solving training, technology and consulting services.

