Rapid Improvement Event

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What is a Rapid Improvement Event?

A rapid improvement event (RIE) is a carefully structured, facilitated workshop that employs lean tools to guide a team to make improvements to their work process. Innovation Program typically uses an A3 to guide the RIE thought process and record and share the team's results.

In traditional lean settings, RIEs are called Kaizen events and usually require a full five-day workweek. Kaizen events are typically two weeks at Toyota. Innovation Program's lean program runs shorter RIEs, sometimes compressed into a half or full day(s) or held in a series of meetings over the course of several weeks. Although the event itself is short, careful preparation and follow-up is important for laying the groundwork for sustained change.

In an RIE, a lean facilitator leads an improvement team through an entire lean (A3) thinking process to get a big-picture view of a process, identify major pain points, investigate the root causes of key problems, brainstorm and prototype possible solutions, and determine an action plan to create lasting change. The facilitator, in collaboration with the project and/or executive sponsor, designs and leads each meeting, but the analysis, brainstorming, and experimentation with solutions are driven by the team(s) who work on the process as part of their regular work.

When should I use it?

- When customers (and/or staff) are frustrated about a process.

- When resolving the problems in the process requires a collaborative approach with multiple stakeholders.
- Factors that might require an RIE to resolve include:
  - The process spans more than one work unit and no one person sees the entire process
  - Communication or empathy between process participants is a problem
  - You believe that an upstream part of the process is causing a downstream problem
  - Broad buy-in is required to agree on solutions to the problem
  - Problems are complex and/or poorly understood

- When you have a specific problem you are trying to solve in a specific work process. Vague problems not connected to a clear process are not helpful (e.g., "poor communication") but can often be scoped into a more specific problem (e.g. "Work orders are completed untimely and coordination between Unit A and Unit B is poor, resulting in frustration and missed deadlines").

- When you have a project sponsor who trusts line staff to come up with solutions. It's important for the facilitator to spend enough time with the project sponsor and staff in the project scoping phase to determine whether the appropriate level of trust is present.

How do I facilitate it?

All the resources in the lean toolbox should be used flexibly within the context of your improvement project, but especially so with RIEs. The framework in this guide should give you a good starting place that can be adapted to fit the needs of your project. Facilitating a team of people through making changes to their daily work is more art than science.

Helping people through the change is even more important than facilitating lean tools. The reason most improvement efforts fail is because the workers required to make the changes are resistant. In the absence of a dedicated change manager, the RIE facilitator must play that role as well.

Work problems are likely to surface that are both emotional and about people (the micromanaging boss, the lazy co-worker, the unreasonable customer). It's important for the facilitator to be able to empathize with the emotions and shift the focus to process solutions: What are the boss's concerns that lead to the micromanagement, and can you design the process to assuage those concerns earlier? What process obstacles might be getting in the way of that co-worker's productivity? What outcome is the customer trying to achieve from the process?

General principles on convening the improvement project team:

- Ensure that the project and/or executive sponsor enable the project team to fully commit to the project. If staff aren't provided with the time to participate, it's unlikely the RIE will be successful.
- Convene a team that includes representatives from all major parts of the process, including customers and external stakeholders, if possible. If you are working with a small team or unit, then one person might need to wear multiple hats.
- Five to eight is an ideal team size, but smaller or larger groups work as well. Aligning the design of the RIE to group size is more important than the number of participants. Innovation Team has participated in Kaizen events led by Rona Consulting with 15-20 team members. Larger, more complex processes generally require more team members.
- Typically, the improvement team consists of the facilitators, a team lead from the client, and several stakeholders representing different portions of the process. The process owner and executive sponsor do not have to participate in the team, as long as they are willing to give the team leeway to make process changes.

General principles on working with the improvement team:

- As a facilitator, your role is to guide the team to develop their own solutions. You provide the lean tools, structure and guidance, but it's important not to impose a solution on the team or pick sides. An important aspect to getting buy-in from staff and sustaining change is to have the solutions come from the team.
- Give as much responsibility to the team lead and team members as possible, even if it takes more time than doing something yourself.

See the A3 Reference Guide for more information about the A3.

Roles

- Executive sponsor – this is the person who signs off on the project plan and has the authority to allocate resources and make decisions. For example, in a RIE with the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department, the Executive Sponsor is the department's Director of Operations who has department-wide authority. For larger engagements, you may also have a project sponsor in between the executive sponsor(s) or team lead. A process that spans multiple departments or divisions should involve a sponsor from each: For a RIE with SFMTA, the Director of Communications and the Director of Transit served as executive sponsors because the process spanned across two large divisions in the agency.
- Team Lead – this is the staff person who is the day-to-day project manager for the improvement project. This person works most closely with the RIE facilitator on planning and executing the RIE.
- Process owner – this is typically a mid-level manager who is accountable for the work process. This person may or may not join the improvement team and may or may not serve as the Team Lead.
- Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) – SMEs might be a part of the improvement team or brought in during the event to answer questions. For example, during Rona's Kaizen event with San Francisco's Department of Public Health and Human Resources Department, a SME on San Francisco's external facing job application system, JobAps, was brought in to answer questions about potential changes to JobAps.
- Customer – It is ideal to have a customer of the process/service participate in the RIE to ensure the voice of the customer is present throughout the event. If it is difficult to get full customer participation, bring customers in to share their experiences or conduct pre-RIE surveys and interviews with customers to gather customer input.
- RIE facilitator – this is the staff person who leads the RIE. This person is trained in lean and experienced in running RIEs.

See the Change Management Reference Guide for more info on how to help people through change.

Key meetings

Before the event:

- **Meet with the project sponsor.** The sponsor is responsible for defining the problem to be solved and how success will be measured. Accessible quantitative metrics are great ("I want to cut customer wait time from 4 hours to 2") but qualitative is fine as well ("We need to ensure that our monthly invoice process holds contractors accountable for meeting their service objectives"). The sponsor should also be comfortable delegating the work of solving that problem to the improvement team and supporting their ideas if possible. The sponsor should choose a team lead and define clear start and end points of the process to be improved (collaboratively with team lead if needed).

- **Meet with the team lead.** Team lead will have primary responsibility on the client side for ensuring that the action plan is complete. The team lead should be the primary point of communication with the team and take responsibility for reporting on the team's progress to the sponsor.

During the event:

The RIE itself may be structured in any number of ways. A traditional lean Kaizen takes a full five days back-to-back, but depending on the problem, you can run events in three full days, one full day, a half day, or a series of meetings over the course of a month or more.

Regardless of how the RIE is scheduled, the team should follow these basic steps:

- **Kickoff, define the problem, and set expectations.** The sponsor should say what change they expect the group to make and assert that they are trusting the details to staff. The facilitator and team lead should set clear expectations for roles and responsibilities, group participation, and attendance.

- **Just-in-time training.** You can optionally provide a small training module at the start of the event (e.g., "Who is the customer?") or dedicate time at the start of a tool to train on it first (e.g., a brief process mapping overview before diving in). We have also run our 4-hour Intro to Innovation training as a first session of the improvement event, with some of the content adjusted to reflect the RIE goals.

- **Map the current state and identify obstacles.** Tools may include:
  - Gemba walks
  - Process mapping, with waste identification and time analysis
  - After process mapping, you may choose one or two key problem areas to focus on for root cause analysis and solutions.

- **Determine root causes of problems.** Tools may include:
  - Voice of the customer
  - Fishbone diagram
  - Five Whys
  - Spaghetti diagram
  - Tally sheet
  - Communication circle
  - Empathy map

- **Brainstorm solutions and prototypes.** Tools may include:
  - Brainstorming and prioritizing via an impact-effort matrix
  - Dedicated time in the meeting to develop prototypes and create standard work
  - Soliciting feedback from team members or other colleagues
  - Designing a future state/ideal state

- **Create an action plan.** Ensure that chosen solutions are assigned to a team member for implementation, with a clear due date. Vague process changes must be translated into concrete steps, often involving the creation or editing of standard work. For example, a poor action plan item is "In the future, post RFPs on the website." This step is likely to be forgotten, as it lives only in the best intentions of the team. A better approach is to embed the process change in standard work: "Create an RFP publication checklist, including instructions to post link on website."

- **Prepare for report-out.** The team should all be responsible for presenting a portion of their analysis to management. Allow time in the meeting to choose presentation sessions and practice the presentation.

After the event:

- **Conduct a report out.** Everyone who touches the process should be invited to the report-out. The team lead should lead the report out and the improvement team should do nearly all the talking. The project sponsor should be prepared to congratulate the team for their work and give support for implementation. (The team's proposals should be vetted with the sponsor during or shortly after the event and adjustments made as necessary – no surprises for the sponsor at the report out!)

- **Monitor progress via 30/60/90 day check-ins.** Schedule check-ins with the project sponsor and team lead for 30 days, 60 days, and 90 days after the completion of the event. These meetings should provide updates on the success measures for the project (A3 box 8) and provide accountability to implementing the action plan. The team lead should be responsible for leading these check-ins.

RIE Task Checklist

Before the event:

Tasks/agenda items for executive sponsor

- [ ] Clarify the problem to be solved
- [ ] Identify what success would look like to the sponsor
- [ ] Define start and end points of process
- [ ] Identify team lead
- [ ] Identify key team members
- [ ] Agree to adopt a posture of saying "Yes if" instead of "No because"
- [ ] Ensure that team members' immediate supervisors know about the event, the time required of their staff, and why it is important to the project sponsor. Have sponsor communicate this if needed.
- [ ] Sponsor should orient team members to the project (by email, at a staff meeting, etc.), including clear expectations to be present for all event meetings

Tasks/agenda items for team lead

- ☐ Make final decisions about team composition
- ☐ Discuss roles and responsibilities for the team lead, lean facilitator, and improvement team members
- ☐ Specify metrics (quantitative if possible)
- ☐ Fill out boxes 1-3 of the A3
- ☐ Set schedule for RIE
- ☐ Ensure appropriate meeting space or virtual meeting for the team
- ☐ Solicit feedback from team lead about meeting agendas and tools to use
- ☐ Set up any planned RIE events requiring external coordination (e.g., off-site or virtual
- ☐ Gemba walks, inviting someone as a Voice of the Customer).

Facilitator tasks

- ☐ Identify and solve any scheduling conflicts with team members
- ☐ Gain general familiarity with the process. Try to have an idea of likely areas of process frustration before the event begins, in order to design tools to solve for them.
- ☐ Develop RIE meeting agendas

<u>During the event:</u>

Tasks for team lead

- ☐ Report to project sponsor on progress (if RIE spans several weeks)
- ☐ Send meeting reminders
- ☐ Hold team members accountable for completing any homework between meetings
- ☐ Provide feedback on agendas and information about how the team is doing
- ☐ Work with facilitator to complete A3 boxes 4-7
- ☐ Ensure that project sponsor, the process owner, other staff who perform the process, and other stakeholders give input to the team's work and the team makes adjustments based on their input. (Avoid surprises at the report-out!)

Facilitator tasks

- ☐ Bring materials/virtual tools needed for facilitation
- ☐ Facilitate team through the use of lean tools
- ☐ Gauge the group's emotions and energy and adjust agendas accordingly
- ☐ Bring coffee or snacks to create a more fun environment and build rapport (if in person)
- ☐ Manage time in meetings, facilitate team through the use of lean tools
- ☐ Coach team lead in how to support the team to do its best thinking and follow-through on tasks
- ☐ Document the team's work: Take pictures, type up experiments and action plans
- ☐ Work with team lead to complete A3 boxes 4-7
- ☐ Prepare report out slide deck

After the event:

Report-out – team lead

- ☐ Schedule a room/virtual meeting space, allowing time for set up and rehearsal
- ☐ Prepare handouts/downloads
- ☐ Incorporate any additional feedback from the report out into the action plan
- ☐ Do something celebratory afterwards (lunch, happy hour)

30/60/90-day check-in tasks – team lead

- ☐ Update A3 box 8 with current process performance
- ☐ Update completion status of action plan items
- ☐ Highlight areas where planned activities need to be adjusted or followed up on
- ☐ Reflect on lessons learned