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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Without thinking there will be no innovation. To think innovatively there needs to be reflection. Reflection, done correctly, leads to perspective and insight. True innovators make *Hansei* (relentless reflection), described in this month's newsletter, a regular part of their routine.

Hansei - An Important Tenet of Innovation

Hansei (hahn-say) translated from Japanese means reflection. In Japan, *hansei* means that when you do something wrong, at first you must feel really, really sad. Then you must create a future plan to solve that problem and you must sincerely believe you will never make this mistake again. *Hansei* is a mind-set, an attitude in Japan.

Says Bruce Browlee, General Manager at the Toyota Technical Center, "*Hensei* is really much deeper than reflection. It is really being honest about your own weaknesses. If you are talking about only your strengths, you are bragging. If you are recognizing your weaknesses with sincerity, it is a high level of strength. But it does not end there. How do you change to overcome those weaknesses? That is at the root of *Kaizen* (continuous improvement). If you do not understand *hansei*, then *kaizen* is just continuous improvement. *Hansei* is the incubator for change - that whole process (Source: Chapter 20 of the Toyota Way, MacGraw-Hill, 2003)."

Hensei fosters real learning and insight. It is not about confirmation or celebration of success; it is about focusing on mistakes/weaknesses and coming up with ways to improve. True *Hensei* involves a rigorous review conducted after action has been taken. Unfortunately Western culture is not very good at practicing *hansei*. Reflection tends to happen only after a catastrophic event whereas companies like Toyota, the military and CEO's like Bill Gates perform *Hansei* on a regular basis to overcome areas of weaknesses. Toyota uses *hansei* as a practical improvement tool like *Kaisen*. At Toyota, employees regularly make time to look back and see how things are working, they think and reflect on how things can be improved. In the military, After Action Reviews (AARs) are commonplace where the team looks back and analyses events when returning to base. Bill Gates, Founder and Chair of Microsoft, takes a solitary sabbatical twice a year at his tiny lakeside cottage to reflect on the past, present, and future of his company, of technology and of his industry.

Hansei is never associated with blaming; it only works in a blame-free culture. For *Hansei* to work in your organization, you must defuse all the blaming that tends to be present in most organizations. This means that we need to consistently see each problem as "a process problem, not a people problem." Similar to the retrospective approach, "Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand (Source: Norm Kerth's, *Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews*, Dorset House Publishing, 2001).

Finally, the key is to perform *hansei* regularly, irrespective of performance; to build *hansei* into your ongoing effort to solve problems innovatively. Here are three types of *Hansei* that you can start using today.

Three Types of *Hansei*

Post-Mortem Reflection: Program summary learning event where you ask these three simple questions: 1. What was supposed to happen? 2. What actually happened? 3. Why were there differences?

Major Program Event Reflection: Held at critical program milestones to reflect on program status and learning opportunities close to the actual event. For example, a Toyota *Hansei* event focuses on: measuring performance to goals, focusing on data, looking at what went right and wrong in the process, gathering internal customer feedback, developing a written improvement plan, and finally, those responsible taking responsibility.

Personal Reflection: Set aside time each day for reflecting and introspecting. For example, take 5 - 10 minutes a day to reflect on your work, your activities, and your plans. Rigorously critique both successes and failures of the day. Look for connections among seemingly unconnected things. Develop questions, new ideas, and "what if" hypotheses. Identify opportunities to try out new ideas.

What's the Bottom line

Hansei, an important tenet of innovation, is about relentlessly reflecting on mistakes/weaknesses and devising ways to improve. The key is to make *Hansei* a part of your regular learning routine.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.
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