

WHITEPAPER: THE COMMANDER & CONTINUOUS PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

Mission Accomplished

IT'S ABOUT READINESS... AND ABOUT LEAVING THE OUTFIT BETTER THAN YOU FOUND IT



› Introduction



During the last several years, we have seen Department of Defense (DoD) organizations that have embarked on an effort to deploy Continuous Process Improvement (CPI) across their commands. In some cases, it seems that the scope of these deployments is focused on processes that span the entire command with little attention to the tactical unit level, regardless of it being a battalion, brigade, regiment, squadron, ship, department or support organization. This often results in these tactical units believing that CPI is the responsibility of the next higher headquarters; those actions supporting it are sometimes viewed as fulfilling a requirement rather than using CPI to meet the tactical needs of the organization. From a tactical commander's perspective, CPI is "somebody else's" responsibility or problem. In this article, we will examine the utility of a CPI program at the tactical level and its potential to achieve results that positively affect readiness and professional development of military personnel. By utilizing a CPI program, one can command a tactical organization that is truly about process improvement and, ultimately, leave the outfit better than you found it.

› Historical Perspective

Being in Command and Making Improvement

For more than 200 years, the nature of command has always been about maintaining readiness through demonstrating effective leadership and constantly improving the organization. While certain commercial organizations may struggle to determine what kind of business they are in, the US military is about readiness and mission accomplishment to support the national military strategy. In executing this mission and maintaining readiness, the commander has been assisted by a core of problem solvers in the form of subordinate officers and non-commissioned officers.

The role of the NCO in the American military ethos has always been one of making it happen. It is often said that NCOs have been the bedrock of solving readiness problems at the tactical level every day, utilizing their experiences and knowledge gained through multiple assignments. But what have traditionally been the tools that have been given to them to apply to problem solving? More often than not, these "tools" are simply previous experience.

Junior officers, on the other hand, do not arrive at the command with a vast array of problem solving experience on which to rely. Often they arrive with tools hastily garnered in their initial officer training that, for the most part, were focused on the tactical application of their job but without specific lessons into a general problem solving methodology. What this environment means for the commander is that process improvement by non-commissioned officers and junior officers in the organization will occur in different ways, with different methodologies and with different results. While civilian organizations focus on process improvement as a way to impact the bottom line, military commands tend to focus on maintaining and improving readiness.

In essence, the application of CPI to the command is an extension of what we have practiced as military leaders for 200 years, just applied with more precision and more tools and pushed down to a much lower level.

› Historical Perspective, cont.



Being in Command and Making Improvement

Across all the services throughout the years, there has been development of problem solving methodologies with the focus on tactical and staff work. Military staff problem solving processes generally center on initially defining the mission, followed by gathering the facts about the mission to include things such as the friendly situation, enemy situation, time, terrain and equipment. These steps are followed by the development of courses of action followed by deciding on, and ultimately executing, that course of action. When one compares this to the commonly accepted Lean Six Sigma problem solving methodology (define, measure, analyze, improve and control), it is very apparent that CPI is simply the rigorous application of the military decision making process. In essence, the application of CPI to the command is an extension of what we have practiced as military leaders for 200 years, just applied with more precision and more tools and pushed down to a much lower level.



› CPI is About Readiness

The most common tactical commander's perception about Continuous Process Improvement is that it only has an impact at an enterprise level of a major command. The thought is that the organization that supports the command will utilize CPI tools and techniques through projects that will improve service to the command, thus positively impacting readiness. But what if CPI tools and techniques can be applied inside a tactical command that can also impact readiness? When one looks at how readiness is measured for a tactical unit, it can be essentially broken down into logistics readiness, personnel readiness and training readiness (at an individual and collective level).

In the civilian sector there seems to be a constant struggle with determining the right metrics. As opposed to military commands, metrics for readiness are well known and well understood, and thus when gaps occur they become readily apparent to the commander and others. Historically the method to apply solutions to these gaps at the tactical level has been, for the most part, a function of the leadership's experience and not necessarily a function of the application of tools and methodologies. What CPI programs bring to the command is a set of common tools that are applied across the command to ensure that there is a standard way of approaching readiness issues. The commander's challenge is, and always has been, not solving problems and implementing improvements but how they establish a command environment in which subordinate leaders make improvements and solve problems in the same way. CPI deployments assist in creating a culture where innovation is recognized and rewarded.

Effective CPI programs assist the commander in establishing a culture where it is understood that in some cases simply achieving the standard is not enough; leaders are constantly encouraged to ask the question, "What can we do to make this better?"

› CPI is About Readiness, cont.



One of the advantages the military organization enjoys over its civilian counterpart is the adherence to strict, well-established standards and the relentless pursuit of maintaining those standards. Non-commissioned officers have traditionally been charged with maintaining standards at the tactical level. In the case of commercial industry, most often standards are understood as the point of minimal acceptance. Commanders at the tactical level are charged with setting high standards above the minimally acceptable. Effective CPI programs assist the commander in establishing a culture where it is understood that in some cases simply achieving the standard is not enough; leaders are constantly encouraged to ask the question, “What can we do to make this better?”.

What a CPI program brings to the tactical level is a set of common tools that can be applied across the board to address readiness. Utilizing the CPI methodology gives the tactical commander insight into the workings of his/her unit and provides them a vehicle to stress the importance of high standards, particularly when applied to readiness.

› Personal Development

of the Junior Officer and Non-Commissioned Officer

Career development and achieving readiness in the command have always been tightly linked. The ability of junior leaders to improve processes and rapidly problem solve has a direct correlation to readiness of the outfit. Over many years, our junior leaders in the command have amazed us with their abilities to improve something or solve an issue that has baffled many. But, this has historically occurred with determination or luck, without a methodology to ensure that the act could be repeated on any issue.

The basic premise of Continuous Process Improvement is that everything in a tactical unit is a process. If there is a process, then it is often repeated, such as preparation for deployment, weapon qualifications or periodic maintenance of equipment. If a process is repeated it can be measured; if it can be measured it can be improved. Creating an environment in which everything that the unit does is viewed as a process and ensuring that the process can be improved is one key to creating a process improvement command climate.

But, as we all know, there is no substitute for experience. A CPI deployment at the tactical level will never be a substitute for that experience, but it can serve as a catalyst or an enabler. Subordinate leaders are challenged to think of how to execute improvements with a set of tools and processes and not just from a perspective of, “That is the way we did it in my last unit.” That is not to say that with the military’s constant turnover of personnel that best practices are not welcome, simply that with CPI there is a method to vet best practices since all commands are not necessarily equal. The junior leader trained in CPI at their last unit can bring those problem solving skills to the gaining command.

With most of the training venues that are afforded to the tactical unit for CPI (Green Belt, Black Belt, etc.), it is easy to get caught up in the mindset that CPI is all about meeting a training number. But to a tactical commander, CPI should be foremost about results and identifying personnel to be trained that can close projects that have the biggest impact on the readiness of the command. Training on CPI tools and techniques should be viewed as an indicator of a junior leader’s potential. The skills and tools learned in Continuous Process Improvement are not only an enhancement to a career but can serve the individual for a lifetime.

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› Driving Readiness at the Tactical Command Level with CPI



Applying CPI tools and techniques can help the tactical commander achieve and exceed readiness targets by reducing the cycle time of activities required to maintain readiness and removing the inevitable waste that occurs with any process.

The deployment activities across DoD have been focused on driving improvements across certain enterprises such as Naval Aviation, Army Material Command, and the Defense Logistics Agency, among a host of others. Although these activities are focused on CPI projects that improve performance from end to end, there are also significant opportunities to utilize the powerful CPI tools at the tactical command level with a focus on improving readiness.

Once again, all activities associated with achieving and maintaining readiness are in their most basic form a process. Most processes are repeated. If processes associated with readiness are repeated, then they can be measured. If they can be measured they can be improved. Applying CPI tools and techniques can help the tactical commander achieve and exceed readiness targets by reducing the cycle time of activities required to maintain readiness and removing the inevitable waste that occurs with any process. CPI also enables the organization to reduce the variation involved with readiness activities.

Although there are many factors involved in readiness at the tactical level, the most dominant factors involved in achieving and maintaining it are associated with personnel, logistics and training. We will examine each of these areas and provide ideas on how CPI projects can be used to improve the processes associated with each of them.

Personnel Readiness

This category is normally associated with the ability of assigned personnel to deploy and be physically ready to individually perform their mission. It also includes the administrative processes associated with them being “deployable.” CPI projects at the tactical level can be chartered to reduce the administrative cycle time of preparing individual soldiers, sailors, and airmen so they are spending less time at the personnel center and more time training for the mission. CPI tools can also be used to reduce the defects in personal records and qualification needed to maintain readiness or prepare for deployment.

Logistics Readiness

Logistics focus has been the bedrock of CPI efforts across the DoD and has utilized the war fighter as the customer in the value chain. At the tactical command level CPI projects can be focused on such logistics activities as reducing the amount and type of equipment and supplies that are maintained or identified for shipment and deployment. Additionally, streamlining the delivery of ammunition and other items to support training venues ensures that the right things arrive in the right place at the right time in the right quantity. Likewise, to conserve precious training time would be a significant contribution to achieving readiness in training.

Training Readiness

There exists significant doctrine and regulation on how to train. The focus of CPI in mission training should be one of a training enabler. Key applications of CPI in support of the training readiness objective should be one of ensuring the necessary resources are streamlined so that precious training time at the individual and collective level can be maximized. Examples of the application of CPI could be optimization of time on qualification ranges, ensuring that the right configuration of aircraft is available for qualification flights, ensuring that the variability of training targets is minimized or reducing the number of support personnel or resources required to properly execute training.

› Making it Work in Your Organization



The job of the unit leadership is to identify the right people. You are already tasking your good people to solve your toughest problems, why not give them the tools and techniques to do it better?

Many CPI deployments have failed because the projects and efforts were focused on issues that were not important to the command. The first step in making CPI work is to ensure that projects and efforts are directly tied to the unit's mission and readiness objectives. The best place to look for opportunities for CPI in a tactical unit is to focus them on the things that "keep people awake at night" in regard to readiness. Looking at items from "After Action Reviews" that clearly point out things that should be happening faster or with less variability is an excellent place to start determining projects for the tactical command. In the end, CPI is about the allocation of resources. Everything is not necessarily a candidate for a CPI project, however, the things that are important to the unit maintaining readiness certainly are.

To make CPI work to your advantage as a commander, you have to pick the right people to execute it. Unfortunately, in some deployments, the personnel selected to be trained were chosen because they simply were available or were seeking a credential. As a commander you typically place your best people against your toughest problems and selecting candidates to be trained in CPI should follow the same logic. The good news about getting the right personnel into training is that most of the services have significant venues for getting people trained. The job of the unit leadership is to identify the right people. You are already tasking your good people to solve your toughest problems, why not give them the tools and techniques to do it better?

But training is simply an enabler; the key deliverables for the unit commander are the results and the impact on readiness. Often times at the start of a CPI deployment, there is a mad scramble to get as many people into training as possible in hopes that as a result of the training the candidate will go find a project that is meaningful. Our experience is that this simply does not work. Candidates entering CPI training need a focus to absorb the material and attain the learning objectives. This is why it is recommended that the projects are assigned to the candidate before they attend their first day of training. In essence, no project ... no training seat.

The old phrase, "The unit does best what the commander checks" is certainly applicable to CPI projects. Successful unit commanders personally involve themselves in CPI projects, often as the project sponsor or as an integral reviewer of the project's progress. As a participant in the CPI efforts, it never ceases to amaze commanders that they learn subjects that they didn't previously know about their unit. With CPI, commanders take on the role of barrier busters in helping junior leaders achieve success. There have been some fears that with a CPI deployment, the commander is left out of the loop on things that should be brought to his/her attention. If the commander is engaged in the projects, then this fear is unfounded. Remember, you are still in command!

Nothing succeeds like success, and this is so very true when you look at CPI programs. When projects close and results are achieved, it is the commander's responsibility to appropriately and publicly reward those who achieved it. The Continuous Process Improvement mindset can be contagious in an organization, but it must be nurtured and supported by the chain of command. One commander with a very successful CPI program constantly told his subordinates: "Ask not if the process is good enough; instead ask how do we make it better."

Summary



In the end, if the unit commander is the sole source of solutions and process improvement, then he/she has failed in one of the basic tenants of command.

In the end, if the unit commander is the sole source of solutions and process improvement, then he/she has failed in one of the basic tenants of command. The United States military has long been recognized as a leader in stressing innovation and initiative, particularly among its junior leaders. Continuous process improvement programs enhance the culture of innovation and initiative by giving our leaders tools and techniques to assist them in their mission rather than relying solely on their gut feel and experience.

The benefit for the tactical commander is a tried and true methodology to focus on readiness and mission accomplishment while giving subordinates the tools and skills that will last them a lifetime and with continuous benefit to the service.

Example CPI projects at the tactical level tied to readiness:

- An Airborne Infantry Battalion utilizes CPI to reduce the cycle time and reduce the waiting time for soldiers conducting administration processes for deployment to Afghanistan
- A United States Marine Corps Field Artillery Battalion applies CPI tools and techniques to identify and manage constraints on getting ammunition to the range for calibration and thus maximizes the time spent for live fire training and specific crew drill
- A Navy FA-18 Squadron utilizes CPI tools and techniques to optimize the proper aircraft availability and configuration to enable pilots to achieve qualifications for deployment in less time
- A United States Air Force Ground support equipment unit utilizes CPI to reduce the variability in ordnance hot reloads in support of a CAS training exercise, thus minimizing the time on the ground and maximizing loiter time in support of ground forces

› About the Author



Tommy Houston,
Vice President, Public Sector Services

Tommy has 30 years of experience in the areas of leadership, program and operations management, and Lean Six Sigma deployments. He is a retired military officer who has served at multiple levels of command with deep experience in large-scale Department of Defense change management efforts, having held key positions in transformation initiatives such as the Army's Task Force XXI, Division XXI, Strike Force and Stryker Brigade Combat Team. Tommy, a certified Master Black Belt, has served in executive leadership roles of Lean Six Sigma deployments at Raytheon, Information Handling Services (IHS Inc), and as deployment leader in one of the largest accounts at Electronic Data Systems (EDS). Tommy is a graduate of the United States Army Command and General Staff College and is a member of the National Defense Industrial Association, Association of United States Army and The Field Artillery Association.

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CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS: POYDRAS CENTER 650 POYDRAS STREET #2320 NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130
NORTHEAST U.S.: 116 CHESTNUT STREET #303 RED BANK, NJ 07701

1.877.577.6888 www.novaces.com

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