Team Improvement Session (using the *Six Thinking Hats*)

Introduction

Team Improvement Sessions are a type of kaizen. They focus cross-functional or single-functional teams on making many minor adjustments to the way in which they work together. This is an effective way to improve the service that the team provides to internal and external customers and to make the operation smoother and easier for everyone. It can also play a useful role in implementing major change.

This team improvement methodology combines kaizen with action learning principles and the 'Six Thinking Hats' (Edward De Bono).

'Six Thinking Hats' (Edward De Bono)

Six Thinking Hats is a powerful way of making the best use of people's capability by separating thinking styles.

In cultures with a tradition of argument, one person tends takes a position on a subject and another person attacks that position. These 'positions' are often the result of habitual thinking and behaviour patterns or internalised beliefs about who we are, how we think and how we behave.

Why do we assume there is one setting that will be adequate for all our thinking? What makes us think that we can only have one thinking and behaviour style? Why do we try to do everything at once?

The Six Thinking Hats allows us to unleash our innate potential for thinking and behaving differently in different situations. When we put on each hat (metaphorically) we are free to adopt the style of thinking and behaviour associated with the hat…just like an actor… curiously with practice we find that the 'adopted' thinking style and behaviour becomes our 'actual style'….until we take the hat off.

Here is a short description of the thinking style relating to each hat:

Yellow Hat

Yellow suggests sunshine and optimism. Under the yellow hat we develop compelling goals for the future. We also make a direct effort to find the value and benefits in a suggestion. Even if we do not like the idea, the yellow hat asks us to seek out the good points: "where are the benefits?", "who is going to benefit?".

White Hat

White suggests paper. The white hat concerns information. When we wear the white hat, we ask the following kinds of questions: "What information do we have?", "What information do we need?", "What information is missing?", "How are we going to get the information we need?", "What questions should we be asking?" The white hat is used to direct attention to available or missing information.

Red Hat

Red suggests fire and warmth. The red hat is to do with feelings, intuition and emotions. You may not know the reasons why you like something or why you do not like something, but when the red hat is in use, you have the opportunity to put forward your feelings and intuitions without any explanation at all. Your feelings exist and the red hat gives you permission to put these feelings forward.

Black Hat

Black reminds us of a judge's robes. The black hat is for caution. The black hat stops us from doing things that may be harmful. The black hat points out the risks and why something may not work. Without the black hat we would be in trouble all the time.

Green Hat

Green suggests vegetation, which suggests growth, energy and life. Under the green hat, you put forward proposals, suggestions, new ideas and alternatives with energy! You become aware of many possibilities in every situation. When the green hat is in use, everyone is creative.

Blue Hat

The blue hat is for looking at the thinking process itself. Use the blue hat at the beginning of a discussion in order to define what we are thinking about and to decide what we want to have achieved by the end of our thinking. The blue hat is used to order the sequence of hats that we are going to be using and to summarise what has been achieved.

Team Improvement Session – Guidance

What collective behaviours and practices do we need to adopt?

Remind yourselves of the goal and the required behaviours and practices, ensuring that everyone has a shared understanding. Write them on the flipchart.

What is currently happening in relation to the above goals?

This is an objective discussion about the team's current observable behaviours and practices. What has actually been happening? Which behaviours have changed and which have not? Avoid criticising anyone…and stick to the facts! Write the main points on the flipchart.

How do you feel about the ways things are going?

Everyone has time to say how they feel about the team's progress and the challenges they face, with no interruptions or judgement. The team members do not need to justify their feelings.

What successes have we had? What difficulties have we overcome?

This is an upbeat discussion about what has gone well since you last met. What have we learnt from what we have or haven't done? No one is allowed to talk about 'problems' or risks! Write the key points on the flipchart.

What is interfering with the change?

This is an honest and purposeful discussion about what is preventing the team from changing collective behaviours. This could relate to equipment, skills, capacity, or simply people's desire to change. Avoid blame!

What actions could we take to achieve the required collective behaviour change?

Use silent brainstorming (e.g. with coloured 'Post-It Notes') to generate as many solutions as possible. Spend time understanding and building on people's initial ideas (remember: avoid judging the ideas!).

What are we now going to do to improve?

Everyone agrees to specific actions which will move the team closer to the desired behaviours and practices. Remember: these are things that you are going to do; not someone else! Document the actions in a team action plan.

Reflection and learning

The team reflects on what they have learnt from the improvement process.