

# Lessons learned from the MDI queens



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There are multiple mechanisms for eliminating waste and incorporating improvements into your organization. I like to depict the various methods using the figure in the graphic, which I call the Improvement Pyramid.

At the peak of the pyramid are Rapid Improvement Events (often called “kaizen” events), that most readers no doubt associate with Lean. A team of experts are assembled for multiple days and charged with analyzing a specific process, identifying waste and building a better way.

Properly facilitated, Rapid Improvement Events can be significantly impactful, both in terms of the process improvements implemented as well as in the growth of team members. A byproduct of events is the confidence and knowledge gained that members often take back to their daily jobs. Rapid Improvement Events are people-resource intensive and so this tends to limit their frequency of use.

In the middle of our pyramid are good, old-fashioned projects. Often, barriers exist that prevent improvements from being implemented within a Rapid Improvement Event. Perhaps equipment must be specified and procured, software created/modified or stakeholders require time to seamlessly transition to the change.

Projects tend to be capital intensive or dependent on specialized support resources (e.g. IT department) and so available funding or staffing tends to limit their use.

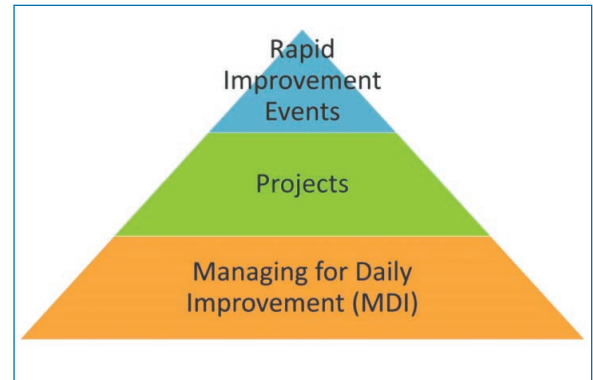
The base of the Improvement Pyramid is Managing for Daily Improvement. These are the “organic” improvements resulting from an entire workforce of engaged employees making frequent, small improvements within their respective spheres of influence.

Many will be tiny but, as a former mentor used to advise, “peanuts are filling.” Some might save only a couple of seconds, but perhaps to a process repeated thousands of times per year. A few will be huge, perhaps rivaling the magnitude of benefit realized from a Rapid Improvement Event.

Unlike Rapid Improvement Events and projects, daily improvements are essentially limitless. They depend only on the level of employee engagement and culture — two factors heavily influenced by leaders.

That’s why I like to refer to MDI as the secret sauce of a truly Lean culture. That’s also why — unlike Rapid Improvement Events and projects — responsibility for MDI cannot be outsourced. It resides squarely on our shoulders as leaders.

The Planning Department for the City of Fort Dodge, Iowa, has captured the magic of MDI. The five ladies within the department have tallied 336 improvements during the past two-plus years. Undoubtedly, additional small improvements were made that escaped their simple, informal documentation process. That’s a lot of improving.



One of the team’s many improvements adds conference rooms and city vehicles as unique entities into the scheduling software. This allows employees to schedule these critical physical assets and to avoid double-booking.

The key to their success is being intentional about improvement. The team schedules an hour each week to focus solely on improving their processes. Team members capture ideas as they occur during the week and bring them to the meeting. Following a short discussion, members split up to work on various ideas.

Scheduling time is absolutely necessary. Proactive improvement work is a classic example of what Stephen Covey refers to a “Quadrant II,” important but not urgent. Unless we proactively schedule time for it, it simply won’t happen.

The team makes it fun. There is inherent team building as the members share their ideas and build upon each other’s suggestions. Members of

other teams often stop by to benchmark MDI Hour and catch the spirit. (I suspect snacks might be involved.)

Adding to the atmosphere is tracking and sharing successes with other departments. In addition to recognizing the team members, it provides opportunities for other areas to copy or build upon their improvements.

The team takes pride in its accomplishments. About a year ago, I coined them “The MDI Queens,” a title they embraced. Following their next improvement meeting, I received a team photo with members proudly donning construction paper tiaras.

Finally, as Vickie, the team’s supervisor, points out, “I think probably the most important thing I’ve learned is that my team is only going to be as engaged in working on MDIs as I am. If it doesn’t seem important to leadership, team members won’t make it a priority either. If I don’t bring it up, it falls by the wayside.”

No truer words regarding leadership were ever spoken.

## RICK SAYS

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