

The ABCs of Work: Continuous Improvement

Career Development



Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles, *The ABCs of Work*, he shares the formula with you.

Greetings readers and congratulations! Simply by virtue of being here you are already on the path to increasing your odds of success. While luck plays a gigantic role in life, that does not mean you are helpless to control your fate. If you want to think of it this way, the tips we'll explore are ways to increase your odds that luck will find you.

Today's topic is **Continuous Improvement**.

Last time we talked about Belief, in the sense that you must believe you can achieve your goals. Today we talk about perhaps the single best way to make progress towards virtually any goal: continuous improvement.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

Continuous improvement is unstoppable

If you've been reading Career Path for a while, you know that continuous improvement is a frequent and favorite topic of mine. I revisit it from various angles and describe how it drives performance at the business and personal level. What makes continuous improvement so powerful?

You don't have to do great things to achieve great things. You simply need to consistently do small things well. The continuous improvement mindset is disarmingly simple and surprisingly powerful.

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Even better, we don't even need to be *good* at something to benefit from continuous improvement. Let's say we're just starting out, complete novices. Our task for the day is to pay attention to what we're doing and improve just a little bit.

What are some places our gains might come from?

- Maybe today's gain comes from reading a reference book or watching a tutorial online.
- Perhaps we ask a colleague who is more advanced to share some tips from their experience.
- How about we pause after our initial attempt and reflect on what went well and what we'll try differently next time?
- Or it could be that we put aside our work product for a few hours with the plan to revisit with fresh eyes what we've written.

- Sometimes we will benefit from nothing more than taking a few minutes to think about our chosen task.
- And if nothing else, simply repeating tasks on a regular basis makes us more comfortable performing.

All this adds up continuous improvement helping luck find us more often.

Does continuous improvement ever not work?

I am such a cheerleader for continuous improvement that I risk ignoring potential blind spots. Does it

work for everyone? Does it work in every setting? Are there pitfalls for the unwary? I think the answers are no, no, and yes.

No, continuous improvement will not work for everyone.

Why is that? You need to be patient, because your gains will be incremental and sometimes vanishingly so. Colleagues around you will take big swings and sometimes make huge gains. This will cause some practitioners to lose hope and lose focus. The slow path is a boring, lonely path. No one will give you a medal for being quietly competent and improving every day.

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Some tasks we must accomplish are short-lived in nature. We're going to complete them (or not) with the tools and skills we already possess. In such cases, a continuous improvement mindset is less useful. Also, some of our characteristics are innate, and much less amenable to change. You can set yourself the goal of becoming taller, but no amount of continuous improvement will get you there.

And yes, there are pitfalls for the unwary.

Perhaps the biggest one is that continuous improvement efforts benefit from prioritization, just like almost everything else we do. We can waste our efforts by focusing on activities that, while improvable, bring us relatively little benefit. Thus, it is helpful to reflect where in our particular circumstances we will benefit a lot from our continuous improvement program. For some, it will be clear writing. For others, it will be presence and public speaking. Others will gain most from learning to exercise the levers of persuasion. And so on.

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A related point: Some tasks are unlikely to advance us at all.

If your goal is to strike it rich, applying continuous improvement principles to the task of playing the slot machine is a fool's errand. The more time you spend pulling the lever, the poorer you will become. Thus, it is important to know when you are betting against the house and direct your activities and time accordingly.

Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as continuous improvement. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and more so because we've kept things simple. Here, to finish, are some honorable mention tips to serve as food for thought:

Consistency — This might be a synonym for continuous improvement, in the sense that consistency implies slow, steady, incremental progress. I wrote about the virtues in Career Path: How Valuable is Consistency.

Collegiality — Our success (or lack thereof) is not entirely in our control. Luck plays a part to be sure. But so do other people and, particularly, their impressions of us. Are you a person people like to be around? Do you help out when you can, even when there is no direct benefit to you? Are you supportive and understanding?

Competence — I said above it doesn't matter if you start out as novices. That's true, but you cannot remain at the beginner level. In your chosen tasks, you must rise to at least the average performer level and ideally go beyond it. True competence is handsomely rewarded, chiefly because it is uncommon. Strive for competence and you might achieve greatness along the way.

Be well.

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Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.