



Guaranteed Project Success

Find Those Quick Wins

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There's no denying the allure of a "quick win" in the world of continuous process improvement. Obvious "just-do-it" opportunities for process improvement are a frequent outgrowth of Process Mapping and "Value-Add" Analysis. We call these opportunities "Quick Wins" or "Low Hanging Fruit."

While coaching a team leader recently, we learned that the sponsor initially denied team members the opportunity to travel to a common location for their all-important project meetings. As a clever tactic, the team quickly identified and implemented a few financially beneficial quick wins. Thus, they convinced the sponsor that the required travel budget would be less than the financial benefits accruing from the quick wins. Fortunately, the sponsor relented, and the team held its critical meetings face-to-face.

Occasionally quick wins generate sufficient improvement to accomplish the team's improvement goals. Even when they are only a stepping-stone to achieving the overall goals, quick wins tend to increase the morale of the team and management.

Beyond the defining characteristic of obvious process improvement, what are the other characteristics of a quick win?

- **Fast:** doesn't take more than a few weeks to implement and measure results
- **Cheap:** no large investment in capital, human resources, equipment, or technology. If it requires a nominal financial expenditure, it is within the limits allowed by the sponsor.
- **Easy:** doesn't require major coordination and planning; a "low-risk" change.
- **Within the team's control:** Minimal chance of having actions undermined by those in control of the process steps. The team and its management are able to gain the support of the people needed to make the change. The scope of the change is within the team's ability to influence.
- **Reversible:** Just in case it does not generate improved results (i.e., unintended consequences), the actions can be reversed and the old way reinstated.

Teams always face challenges (and opportunities!) for quick solutions. At ProcessGPS, we have learned these helpful facts about quick wins:

- ✓ They have a high ratio of benefit to effort, promising a substantial return on investment (Consider the matrix, Fig. 1).
- ✓ Typically they do not require process workers to change substantially what they are doing now.
- ✓ Teams identify, agree upon, and implement them during the Define and Measure stages.
- ✓ Kaizen, the technique of continuous incremental improvement is, in large measure, an effort to identify and implement a manageable number of quick wins.
- ✓ Usually, some data are available to illuminate a problem or to point toward an obvious solution.
- ✓ Even though a quick win generally will not address a root cause comprehensively, it does generate improved results or process efficiencies (called “moving in the direction of goodness”).

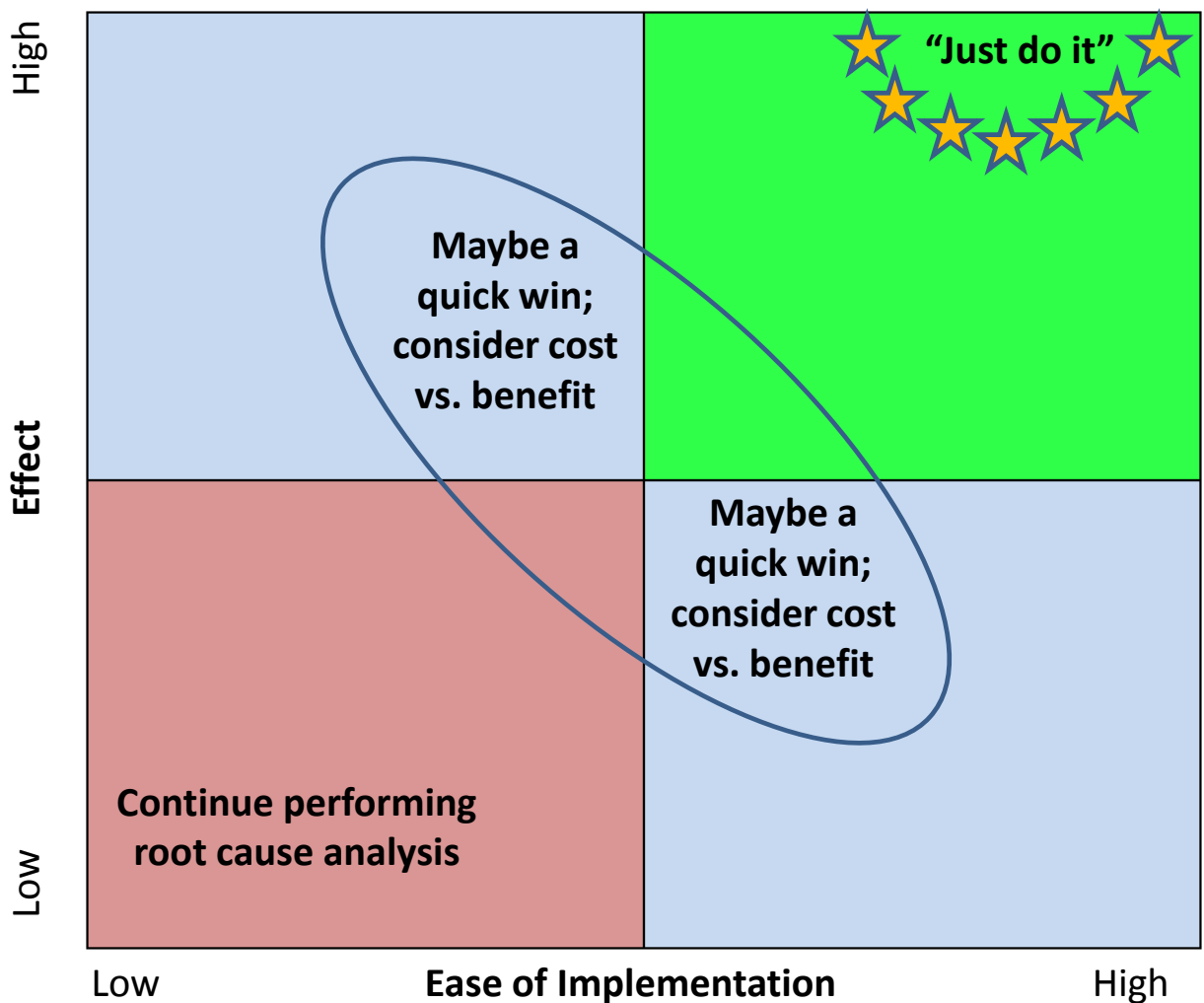


Figure 1: Quick Win Implementation Guideline

What are the benefits of quick wins?

- ✓ They bolster team morale in the initial efforts of the project life cycle.
- ✓ They buy time so that the team can do a comprehensive root-cause analysis. Sponsors and senior leaders are often impatient for project benefits, and early benefit realization allows the team to work without unreasonable pressure, thus allowing sufficient time to collect comprehensive data and to analyze statistically for root causes.
- ✓ Processes benefit directly from new efficiencies.
- ✓ Momentum from the quick win will carry the team forward to greater challenges.

With all the advantages and opportunities for making a difference with quick wins, could there possibly be any risks? Indeed, potentially there are very real risks. Our broad experience informs us that teams are well-advised to consider the following:

- ✓ Unintended consequences: a quick win may negatively affect related projects or processes.
- ✓ With only limited data available (at least initially), the “obvious” action may be incorrect.
- ✓ Occasionally quick wins cause the process to perform worse (hence, the importance of being reversible).

In the “cultural history” of many organizations, approaches similar to finding quick wins (under other names) constitute the generalized approach for handling crises and for improving all processes. In this firefighting mode, career managers are recognized and rewarded for their abilities. Although there is always a need to address crises by intuitive problem solving, there is also great benefits to be gained by taking proactive steps to prevent problems and to address chronic issues by seeking breakthroughs in process performance. Quick wins have a place, but they do not constitute a comprehensive approach.

Finally, consider some additional points. Following the “Value-Add” Analysis and the identification of potential quick win opportunities, the team should:

- Re-visit the project charter. Quick wins that yield substantial improvement may be sufficient for meeting the overall project goals.
- Implement the opportunities using the P-D-C-A method:
 - PLAN the proposed “quick win” implementation details
 - DO everything you need to do to carry on the implementation
 - CHECK and verify that the improvements are indeed successful and that they accrue the expected benefits
 - ACT to make sure that these improvements are maintained and that others may benefit from them

- Where risk minimization is paramount, the team must move beyond quick wins to apply the rigorous DMAIC (Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control) methodology to ensure that root causes have been identified and mitigated.
- There is no substitute for comprehensive training in statistical root-cause analysis and problem solving. ProcessGPS considers that an effective practitioner, knowing all of the various tools and techniques of problem-solving, is in the best position to know when to take calculated risks and whether skipping root cause validation in the interest of time is a wise decision. Managers who are impatient or those not trained rigorously in the methodology may only have the knowledge of applying quick wins, which may not be sufficient for making permanent improvements to the process.

Now, go and find those quick wins!



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