10 Practical Questions That Will Help Embed CI
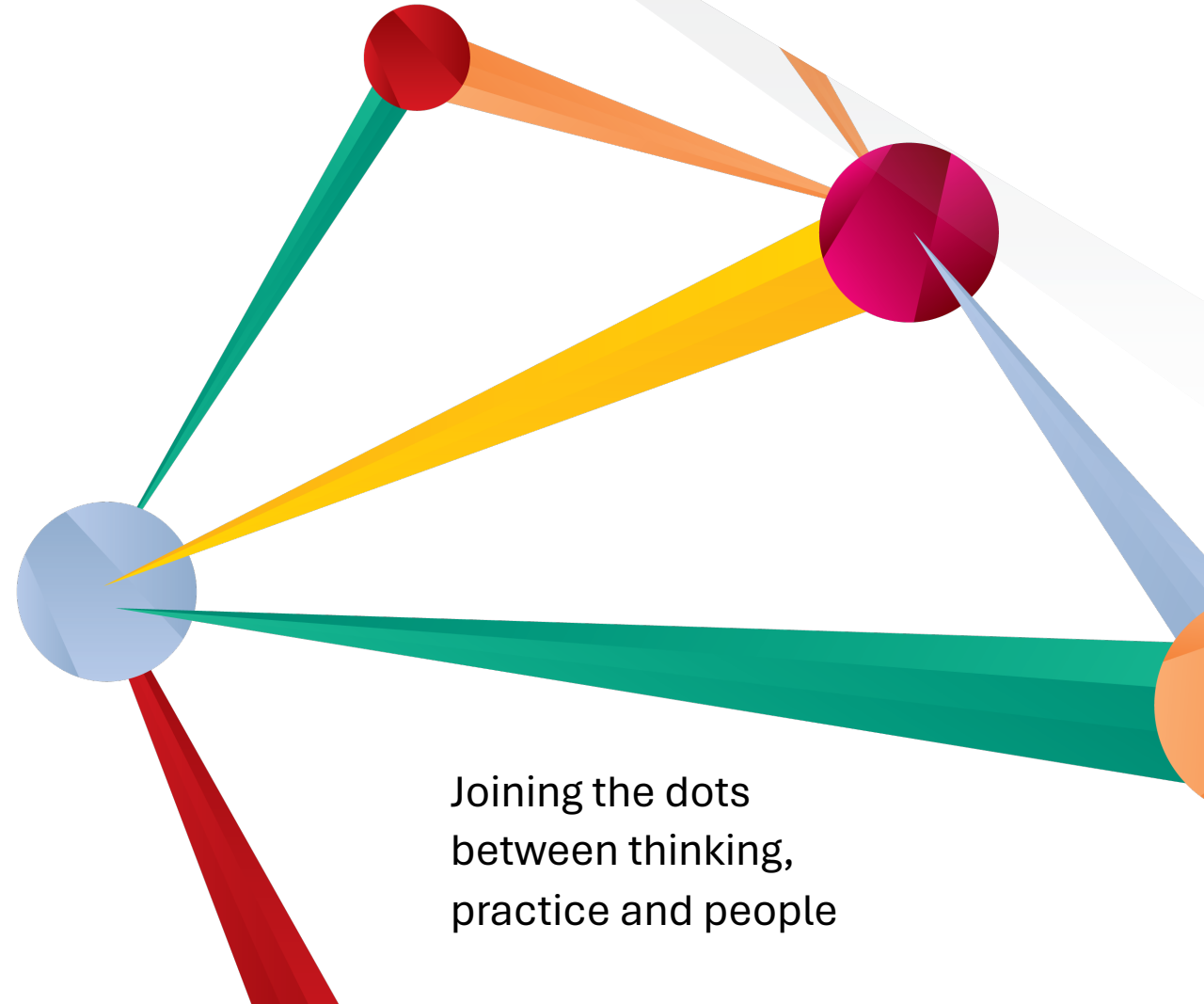
by ICiPS
Institute for Continuous Improvement in Public Services

The ICiPS world of CI focuses on the systems, knowledge and behaviours that underpin a culture of improvement

ICiPS definition of CI:

'CI is a never-ending journey that ensures the organisation's purpose is met as efficiently and effectively as possible. It engages every employee in a blend of incremental, step and transformational change'

Why ask questions about continuous improvement (CI)?

Organisations seeking to embed CI often start by training employees in tools for change. This approach is unlikely to result in CI becoming the way work is done.

The extent to which CI is practiced is a direct reflection of the culture of the organisation and the approach to embedding CI at every step. If this isn't adequately thought through, improvement will never become the norm.

Here we consider 10 key questions that can help get the foundations right.
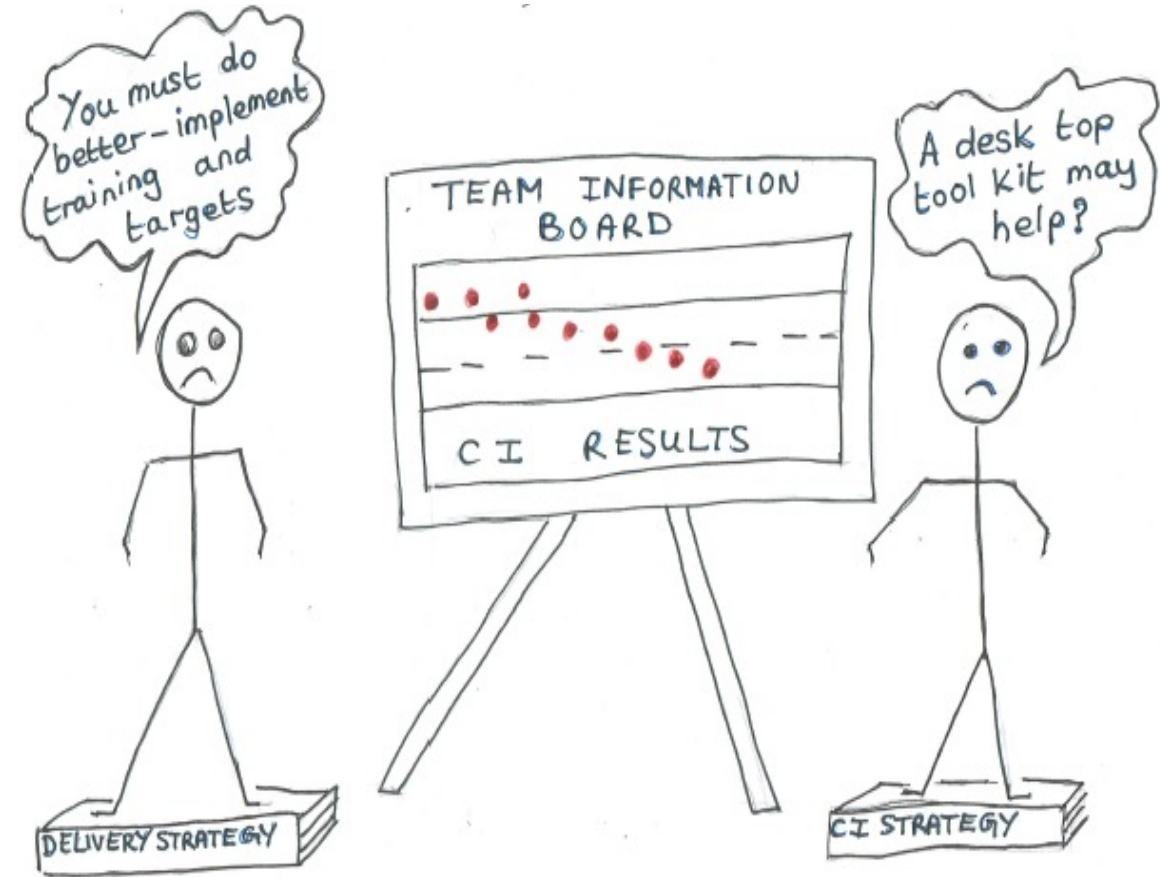
Question 1   'Do leaders truly understand the concept of CI?'

Why ask the question? There is often a disconnect between what leaders believe CI is, what it actually is, and the benefits it delivers. To be able to set the foundations for success, leaders must invest time to understand the principles, and they must buy into them.

The ideal position:
- Leaders and managers recognise the benefits of CI and champion these. They should have a firm grasp of the principles and different approaches to managing different types of change. They need the skills to manage a workplace that continuously changes.

Question 2   'Are we totally clear on our purpose is and where our focus lies?'

Why ask the question? Many organisations do not articulate their purpose well enough for employees to be able to empathise with, making it far more difficult for employees to see the part that CI can play in meeting and sustaining the achievement of purpose.

The ideal position:
- Ensure the purpose is clearly articulated and shared with every employee, customer and stakeholder.

Question 3 　　　'Are we clear on our short, medium and long-term strategic goals and what needs to be done in every area to achieve them?'

Why ask the question?

Clarity of direction should ensure all change activities align. It should help to prevent change that subsumes time and cost but adds little value or is quickly superseded by events.

The ideal position:

- CI should be considered as an integral part of strategic planning; looking holistically at what needs to be improved in every area of activity in order to deliver strategic objectives.

Why ask the question? If leaders don't define what each principle means in practice, people will either fail to embrace them or interpret them in their own way. Words that are commonly used, but not considered adequately are 'empowerment' 'innovation' and 'collaboration'.

The ideal position:
The implication of every principle needs considering in the round:
1. How does this translate into working practices?
2. Are we prepared to accept any impact this may have e.g. risk?
3. What needs to happened to systems, processes and people to enable this way of working?
4. Do we need visibility of actions arising and if so, how will we get this?
5. Is development required to provide the necessary skills?
6. Where do accountabilities and responsibilities sit?
7. How do we ensure time is available for this to happen?

WHY ask the question? Culture is influenced by working principles

The ideal position:
- Define principles that embed CI e.g.

'We work collaboratively with stakeholders'

'We take personal responsibility for the quality of our work'

'We seek knowledge that will help us to improve'

'We see failure as an opportunity to learn'

Question 5   'How effectively do we embed our principles?'

Why ask the question?

Principles need to become the norm from recruitment to exit interviews; a natural part of the organisation's language with individuals held to account for embracing them.

The ideal position:
- Employee lifecycle and touchpoints are defined from recruitment to exit interviews
- CI messages are embedded and reinforced at every employee touchpoint
- Accountabilities and responsibilities are defined

Question 6

'Is insight managed in a way that enables improvement opportunities to be identified?'

Why ask the question?

Employees will not be in a position to identify areas for improvement without adequate insight. Defining information requirements will avoid unnecessary gathering, processing and storing of information.

The ideal position:

Have the right information in the right place and at the right time to enable opportunities to improve and be readily identified. This means:

- Data gathering aligned with strategic requirements
- Systems to collect data
- Policies for data retention, storage and disposal
- Communication channels that transport the data where it is needed
- A method of turning silo-based data into organisational intelligence
- Defined accountabilities and responsibilities at every level

Question 7   **'How effective are our communication channels?'**

Why ask the question?

An organisation will struggle to maintain CI without effective communications and some of the best CI cultures we see have been where the communication channels have created a continuous loop of insight and learning.

The ideal position:

- Key messages and information flow to where they are needed
- Principles are woven into every message to reinforce CI as a way of working
- Improvements are shared
- Lessons learned are shared

Why ask the question? Changing an organisation's key processes requires as much expertise and experience as you would seek to manage any professional area of activity.

The ideal position:
- A core of skilled and experienced professionals lead change that employees are not empowered to do, and who can offer support.

Question 9   'How will we recognise and reward effort?'
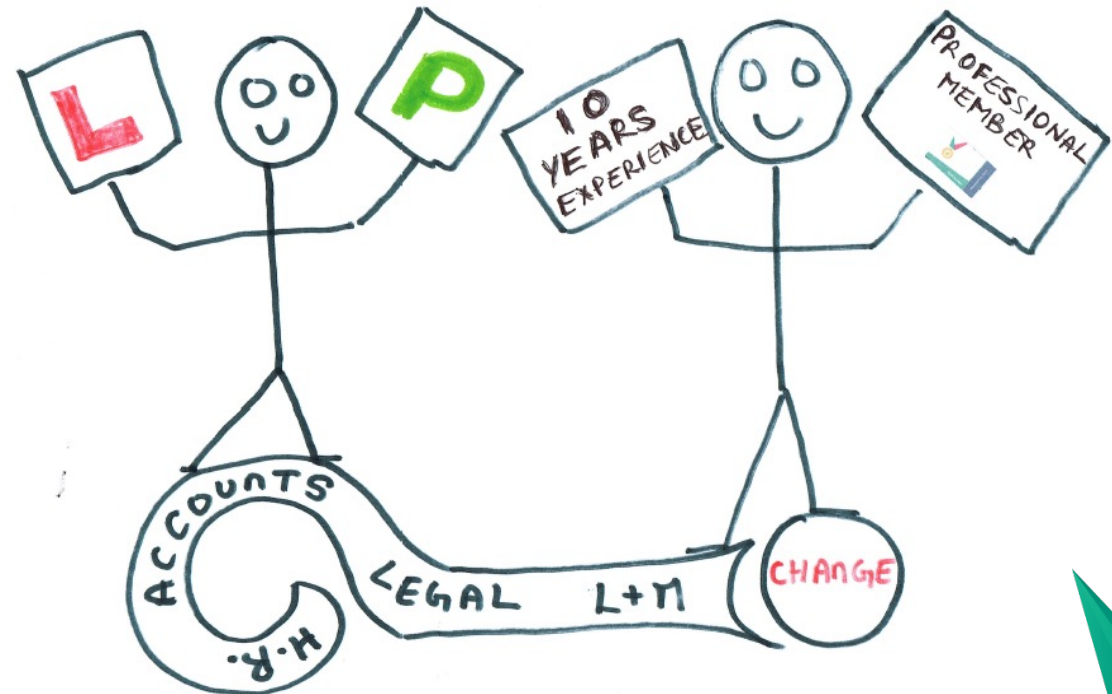
Why ask the question?

It is important to recognise employees who try and not just those that deliver significant successes. This shows that leaders are aware of what is happening, recognise that employee are living the principles, that employees won't be blamed if things don't work out but learn from it, and most importantly that employees matter.

The ideal position:

- A process that ensures employees ideas and change initiatives are flagged to those who can provide recognition
- Include improvement as a standard meeting agenda item at every level
- Recognise effort and improvements through performance development

Why ask the question? To answer this question, use facts that will enable you to judge where you are now and avoid unnecessary activity.

There are numerous maturity assessments you can use, many available on our website. These range from those that provide a silo-based view to tick box exercises.

KPI's, EFQM and financial reports etc will confirm the direction of travel but not how well embedded CI is, how effective your systems are or how well your infrastructure enables CI.

The ICiPS CI Maturity Assessment measures the effectiveness of systems that underpin a culture of CI and gathers employee insight. This enables development of a targeted action plan. This is free and available from our website and enables you to build your own benchmarks year-on-year.   https://icips.org/recognising-success