



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

MOVING THE NEEDLE ON CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

There is unprecedented pressure on organisational leaders today to improve business performance by building efficient processes and highly productive teams. With their list of priorities getting bigger and bigger, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed, but that's where the concept of continuous improvement (CI) has much to offer in the way of perspective. Simply put, CI focuses on making small, incremental changes over time to achieve a larger goal. Arguably, it has never been more crucial for businesses to have a CI custodian responsible for equipping an organisation with the tools and resources it needs to ensure that the needle on continuous improvement is always moving.

But it doesn't end there. As disruption comes knocking on the doors of businesses once again, these CI leaders need to come together to exchange ideas and share their learnings so that organisations can get better at turning change and uncertainty form into a great strategic advantage.

Our series begins with a three-part article authored by our Continuous Improvement Chief Lead here at Enlighten, Claudio Dalla Venezia. With a background in operational excellence, consulting, and program management, Claudio took charge of the Enlighten CI practice in 2020. As a Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt, Claudio specialises in driving strategic business transformations by improving processes, combining technology, people, and operating models to help businesses achieve operational excellence. Having managed large-scale CI projects from inception to delivery, Claudio is well-placed to unpack the concept of CI in the language of business leaders.



As disruption comes knocking on the doors of businesses once again, these CI leaders need to come together to exchange ideas and share their learnings.



The three articles will look at the then versus now of CI to emphasise why the concept is a timeless one, before asking whether CI is more of an art or a science, and finally exploring how a Continuous Improvement leader can unite teams and entire organisations around a shared purpose.

Later on in the series, we will also endeavour to bring you insights from other leaders who live and breathe CI and the results they are seeing on the ground through their relentless pursuit of continuous improvement.

Success for organisations today hinges on a sound, robust CI strategy with a capable CI leader at the helm, making our new thought leadership series *Moving the needle on CI* a must-read for business leaders today.

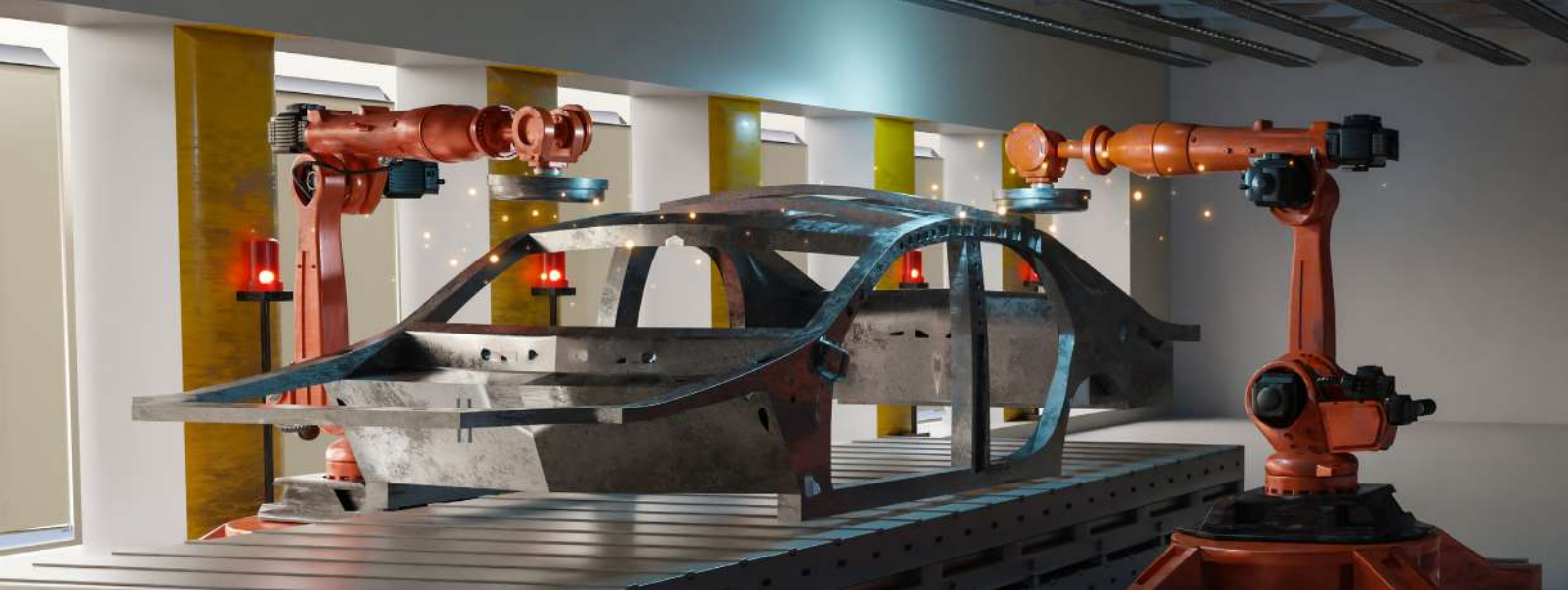
Moving the needle on CI

- ✓ Continuous Improvement: Important then, fundamental now
- ✓ Is CI an art or a science: How do we bridge the gap between theory and action?
- ✓ The Continuous Improvement leader: Uniting teams around a shared purpose

CLAUDIO DALLA VENEZIA

Chief Lead Continuous Improvement,
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CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: IMPORTANT THEN, FUNDAMENTAL NOW

If organisational leaders are going to harness CI for strategic business transformation, they'll need to understand it — and not just in the current context. Delving into its historical relevance and evolution over the years can truly help today's organisations appreciate the driving force of change that CI can be.

The pioneers of continuous improvement

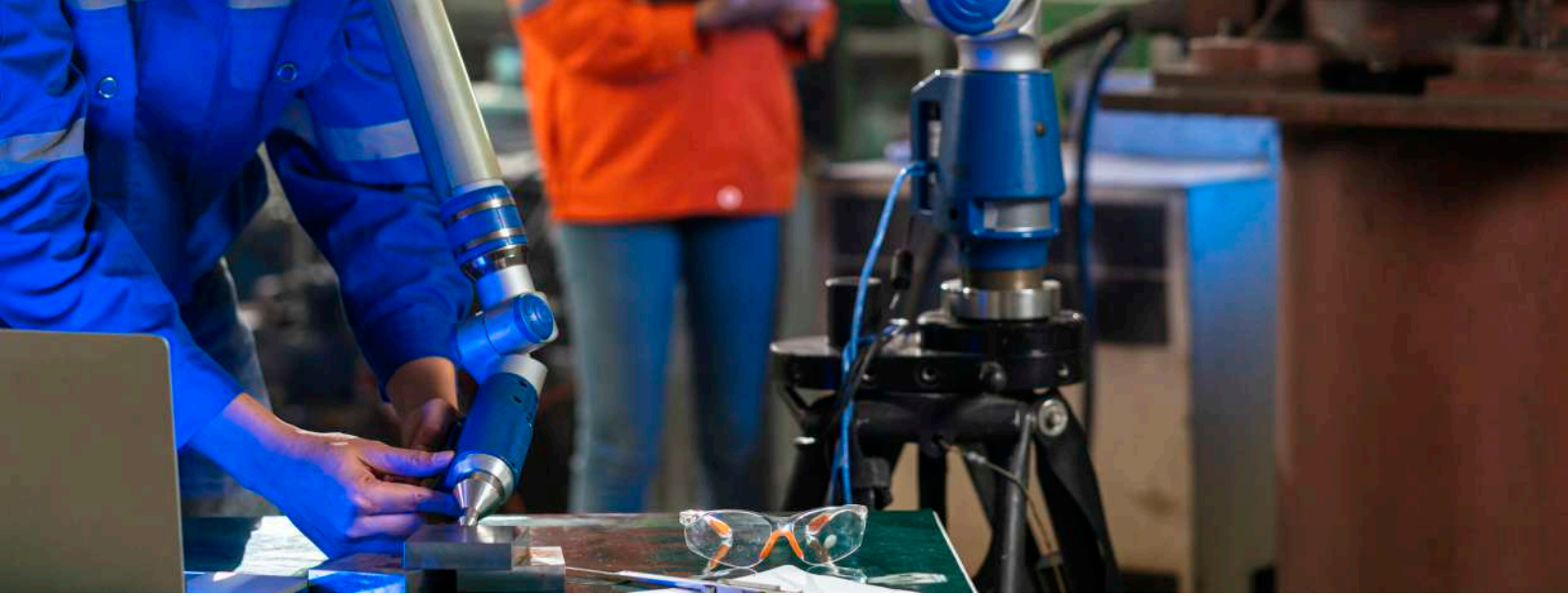
Some of the earliest attempts at optimising industrial efficiency can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution itself. In the late 19th century, Frederick Taylor was the first man to scientifically analyse work and devise the most efficient method of completing tasks. Taylor's recommendation of using written documentation for every part of a worker's job has echoes in quality standards used even today (ISO 9000 series.) During the same time, Frank Gilbreth emerged as an efficiency expert whose time and motion studies revealed that the key to improving work efficiency was reducing unnecessary motions, and this led to more research into the field of ergonomics.

Trailblazers of quality in the modern world

In the early 20th century, Henry Ford led the revolution in manufacturing with pioneering mass-production techniques that are still celebrated today. Other visionaries, such as Walter Shewhart, W. Edwards Deming, Kaoru Ishikawa, and Joseph Juran, made significant contributions to quality management by introducing concepts like Quality Circles, Statistical Process Control, Root Cause Analysis, and Quality Improvement. The emergence of the Toyota Production System (TPS) marked a pivotal moment with its relentless pursuit of the highest quality, lowest costs, and shortest lead times, introducing principles like Waste Removal, Kaizen (Continuous Improvement), and Just-in-Time. The pursuit of process improvement has captivated scientists, scholars, and researchers for decades.



"The emergence of the Toyota Production System (TPS) marked a pivotal moment with its relentless pursuit of the highest quality, lowest costs, and shortest lead times."



The machine that changed the world

Around 1990, Jim Womack decoded the Toyota Way and introduced the concept of Lean Manufacturing in his influential book, 'The Machine That Changed the World.' Simultaneously, Six Sigma emerged at Motorola, utilising statistics and the scientific approach to reduce variation and enhance quality. It was around then that the term 'continuous improvement' not only entered the business vernacular, but firmly cemented its place as a strategy in its own right.

Towards the end of the 20th century, CI methodologies and Lean principles spread to service industries such as banking and insurance, resulting in improved customer service and cost reduction. This shift also influenced product and software development, where practices such as Kanban were used to accelerate process lead times. As companies continued to leverage CI to maximise their advantage, it paved the way for mass digital transformations powered by technologies such as Robotic Process Automation (RPA), machine learning, and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Today, a multitude of methodologies coexist, including Lean, Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Management (BPM), Business Process Reengineering, Agile, Theory of Constraints (TOC), Lean Six Sigma, AI, Machine Learning, ISO standards, and other digital approaches.

But if the history of CI tells us one thing, it's that strategic use of data has always been at the crux of driving transformation, enhancing efficiency, and maximising return on investments.



"As companies continued to leverage CI to maximise their advantage, it paved the way for mass digital transformations."



The renewed importance of CI in the era of automation and AI

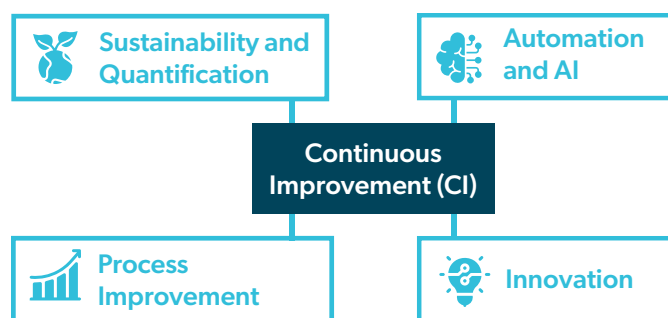
We've just established that CI is not a revolutionary concept. So why should businesses still consider it, especially amid recent breakthroughs in generative AI and machine learning? Isn't innovation about adopting the new? Yes, but CI and new transformative technologies are not conflicting entities. In fact, continuous improvement is less of a tool in this context and more of an approach or philosophy that, when realised, allows organisations to harness the capabilities of new tools and technologies more effectively. In other words, CI has gained renewed importance in the era of automation and AI as it creates an environment where any new change can not only safely and sustainably play out, but its impact can be quantified too.



"Continuous improvement is less of a tool in this context and more of an approach or philosophy."

At first glance, CI might not feel as cutting-edge as AI, edge computing, robotics, or automation, making it challenging for operational excellence leaders to engage with CEOs and demonstrate the value of CI. But this is where they need to put on their Continuous Improvement leader hat and articulate to leadership teams that no matter how the business world evolves, it is imperative that processes continue to be improved by identifying and removing waste, as it is the only way to sustain growth, outperform competition, and continue to remain relevant to customers.

CI is integral to the successful integration of automation and AI in business processes





CI is not 'still' fundamental but 'especially' fundamental' for businesses today

Adoption of new technologies is imperative for businesses today. However, rushing into implementations without doing the required legwork can undermine the credibility of new investments and diminish the likelihood of achieving the desired ROI.

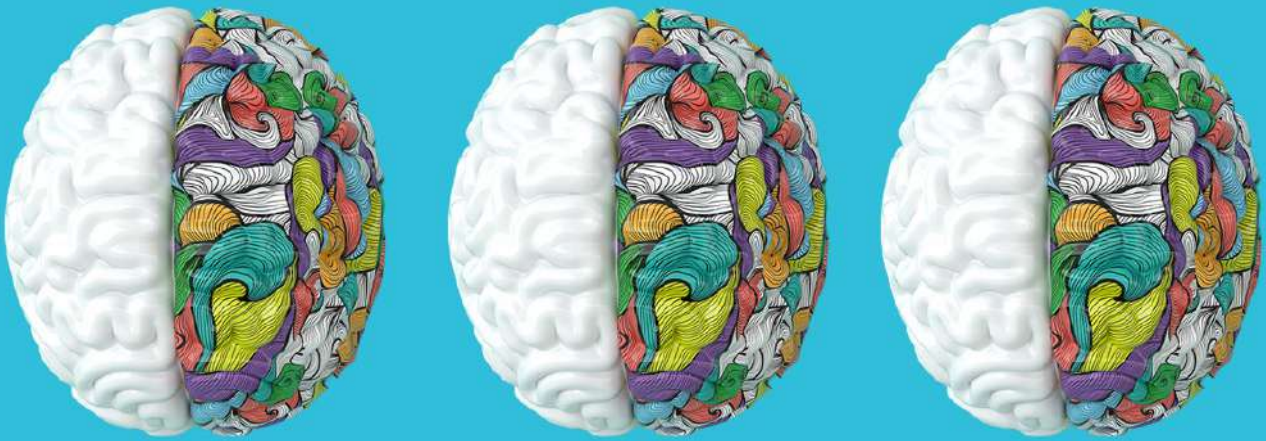
Large-scale, transformative projects such as those that involve AI, robotics, or other cutting-edge technologies usually require large budgets and take time to roll out and deploy. This can turn into a waiting game for business leaders especially if their processes are outside the scope of the transformation. But with the appropriate CI skills, leaders can guide their teams to take a proactive approach to improving processes and removing waste which delivers results sooner. When individual team members can see their work translate into impact, it feels more meaningful, which further strengthens the continuous improvement mindset across the organisation.

CI skills along with access to comprehensive, standardised, and dynamic datasets allows leaders to identify and quantify opportunities, design effective processes, and pinpoint scalable automation solutions capable of addressing system-wide issues, which translates into significant macro-level benefits for their organisation. CI tools such as Enlighten track every aspect of an operation, providing data that includes volumes, hours, backlogs, waste, value-add, costs, and FTEs for each activity, process, linked process, and client. This data-led approach expedites the discovery process, enabling leaders to swiftly identify quick wins and set the ball rolling on automation opportunities.

Not only do CI tools excel at using data and scientific approaches to provide visibility and help businesses solve complex issues, but as a methodology, it can also result in a cultural transformation. By design, CI includes people in the process of change and fosters a culture of continuous learning, which is invaluable in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.



"By design, CI includes people in the process of change and fosters a culture of continuous learning."



IS CI AN ART OR A SCIENCE: HOW DO WE BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND ACTION?

When we think of science, objectivity springs to mind followed by systematic observation, experimentation, and the testing of the data in question. While art, as an expression of imagination or skill, is where nuance thrives. However, when the scientific approach is tempered with artistic thinking, it allows concepts to be viewed from more than one point of view, gives the observer more agency, and makes it a more meaningful endeavour overall. This is why we can comfortably say that continuous improvement (CI) is neither an art or a science — but a harmonious dance between the two.

The science of CI primarily consists of analytical skills. This domain encompasses process analysis, statistical tests, systems thinking, Lean tools, and forms the data-driven side of CI. These are undeniably fundamental skills for CI practitioners and CI leaders as they form the base framework necessary for improvement. Proficiency in these skills, while essential, may not fully deliver the desired business outcomes in isolation.

What truly sets outstanding CI practitioners and CI leaders apart is something we refer to as the Art of CI. This facet involves soft skills, change management expertise, and interpersonal abilities. It's about leveraging emotional intelligence to navigate the intricate dynamics of diverse personalities, industries, cultures, and locations. The Art of CI enables CI practitioners to connect with people, foster collaboration, and inspire effective change. It transforms data and analysis into compelling stories that engage and motivate audiences to take action for positive transformation.

CI leaders need to develop the ability to discern when to emphasise the scientific approach to provide rigour and structure and when to lean on the Art of CI to ignite inspiration and lead change effectively. Ensuring these two facets of CI are developed in parallel and maintaining this fine balance allows business leaders to harness the full potential of CI, delivering the transformative impact it promises.



“Continuous improvement is neither an art or a science—but a harmonious dance between the two.”



Bridging the gap between concept and action

Equal parts art and science, there is no doubt that the theory behind continuous improvement is compelling. However, organisations don't always take action when it comes to CI. This is partly due to the sheer hype around the possibilities with AI, machine learning, RPA, digital solutions and more, which seem to have given much of the business world tunnel vision. Secondly, there is a flawed perception that CI only benefits underperforming companies.

On the contrary, continuous improvement practices can help organisations go on a journey from good to great. It needs to be emphasised that understanding the concept of CI and taking action are two completely different things. For organisations that may not know where to begin or how to approach CI, Enlighten can help bridge the gap between concept and action.



“Continuous improvement practices can help organisations go on a journey from good to great.”

- **Good data: The building blocks of CI.**
Quite often inaction stems from not knowing what action to take. This is where visibility over key processes powered by click-of-a-button access to data can play a critical role in inspiring action. Our CI practice leverages the Enlighten software, our robust CI framework, and close collaboration with clients to not only get visibility of their current challenges but use the data already available to get to the root cause of each challenge and devise effective solutions aligned with the organisation's overarching goals.
- **Training on tools and techniques.**
We also offer CI training courses specifically tailored to equip supervisors, team leaders, managers and CI practitioners with CI tools, and show them how to use Enlighten data to drive improvement in their day-to-day roles. This truly adds another dimension to the breadth of skills in organisations' leadership teams.



- **Sustaining the change**

While the above steps inspire action, our CI practice also emphasises the ‘mindset’ needed to sustain the change. After all the phrase ‘continuous improvement’ denotes ongoing action by its very definition. This stage prepares organisations to make the pursuit of CI a relentless one, despite the challenges of competing priorities, resource constraints, or a lack of urgency or enthusiasm.

- **The top-down effect**

Lastly, true success in CI implementation occurs when senior leaders take on an active sponsorship role. We enable leadership teams to not only set the tone for continuous improvement but also play a crucial role in developing a culture around it. This includes proactively supporting their teams in ensuring that solutions are not just conceived but effectively put into practice to see those small incremental changes—and celebrating them—while working towards more landmark goals.

CI: The Enlighten way

The Enlighten way is more streamlined than traditional CI Project delivery timelines to allow clients to see ROI faster. By bringing together the aspects mentioned above, Enlighten CI creates a dynamic paradigm where CI is not just a concept but a living, breathing reality, delivering tangible benefits to organisations especially as the pressure on them to improve business performance grows – despite economic headwinds and ongoing disruption.

Having discussed the historical importance of CI and understanding how businesses can move past the theory of CI and take action, it’s time to unpack the role of leadership in moving the needle of CI.

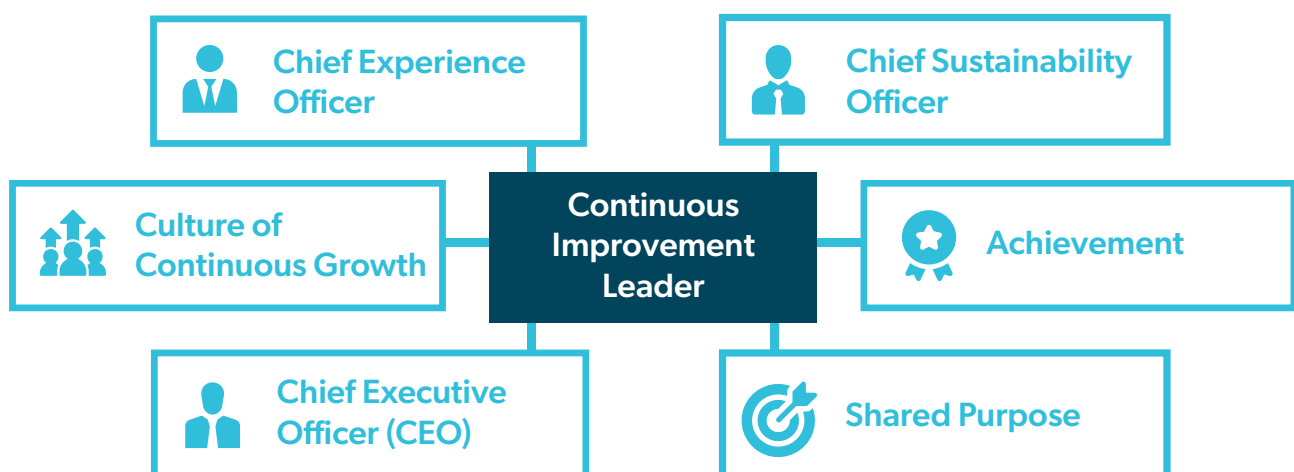


THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT LEADER: UNITING TEAMS AROUND A SHARED PURPOSE

From Chief Experience Officer to Chief Sustainability Officer, C-suite titles are constantly evolving to reflect the changing world of business. Today, there is a great need for a Continuous Improvement leader who can effectively unite their team around a shared purpose, fostering a culture of continuous growth and achievement. Here are the ways in which today's business leaders can embody this idea and be the CI leader that their organisation can lean on.

- A shared purpose: The power of narrative**
 Uniting a team around a shared purpose begins with clear communication that harnesses the power of storytelling, visual imagery, and other devices to ensure that their team understands why a shared purpose is crucial. We often use the 'burning platform' analogy to drive home the fact that urgency and importance are key when it comes to critical moments, and everyone has a role to play before it's game over. Another handy trick is using the 'WIIFM' method to guide conversations, which stands for 'What's In It For Me.' When team members see how a shared purpose benefits them personally, it gives them a real stake in it.

Evolution of C-suite roles and the Continuous Improvement Leader





- **Measuring success and empowering teams to contribute**

A shared purpose needs to be measurable. It can be as simple as defining 3 to 5 key performance measures directly linked to the shared purpose. It's like setting up signposts along the journey to give the team a common language and a clear sense of direction. Secondly, leaders should empower their team to be part of the solution, calling upon them to make an impact on the 3 to 5 key performance measures identified. This is vital because team members are often the experts in their own areas and can offer the best perspective on granular details.

- **The importance of the right skills**

It's surprising how many leaders expect their teams to embark on a journey of continuous improvement without assessing whether their teams have the means or the know-how. Offering the training and resources—whether that's in the form of CI tools or learning workshops—is critical. A natural by-product of doing this is that it helps the entire organisation speak the same language of CI.

- **See the process first-hand**

CI leaders, visiting 'the Gemba', where work happens, is essential. Here, they observe the process and create a map of how work flows to deliver customer outputs. This is at the heart of CI, enabling leaders to identify issues, bottlenecks, and inefficiencies firsthand. With this hands-on experience, they work with their teams to improve workflow, enhance process performance, and establish standards for consistent results.

- **Enjoying the CI journey**

For Most importantly, celebrating every effort or idea that advances the key performance measures, regardless of the magnitude is important as it can prevent the relentless pursuit of CI from feeling like a never-ending journey without a destination. Every leader should aim to embody the principles of continuous learning, problem-solving, and adaptability, because it sets the tone for the whole team. A commitment to growth and betterment is infectious and can foster a culture of continuous improvement right through the organisation.



How Enlighten can help leaders become CI Leaders

Enlighten's CI training programs are specifically crafted to equip Service Industry leaders with the skills to solve day-to-day problems, remove waste, and enhance processes using a systematic, data-driven approach. In addition to technical competencies or the science of CI, our industry-leading CI programs also allow leaders to harness their emotional intelligence, using the art of CI to enhance their change management skills. Our interactive courses incorporate hands-on simulations covering applicable CI tools, data analysis, project and risk management, and facilitation capabilities. These self-paced courses are seamlessly complemented by expert-led group sessions and live projects, delivering an immersive learning journey for today's CI leaders.



"Our interactive courses incorporate hands-on simulations covering applicable CI tools, data analysis, project and risk management, and facilitation capabilities."

Lastly, as organisations continue to face growing pressure to improve business performance, it is our hope that the CI leaders we train and support, connect with experts in the field and CI practitioners to exchange ideas, share learnings, and give renewed impetus to the conversations around continuous improvement.

6 reasons our approach delivers



Change Management



Business Engagement



Governance Engagement



Enlighten Data



Proven CI Framework







Skill & Expertise

ABOUT US

To meet our vision of being the partner that business leaders want to work with, we understand that a strong, experienced, effective and visionary team is needed, with the energy, commitment and drive to succeed. We deliver on our promise through our leading propriety methodology that combines business experience, technology and data analytics.

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