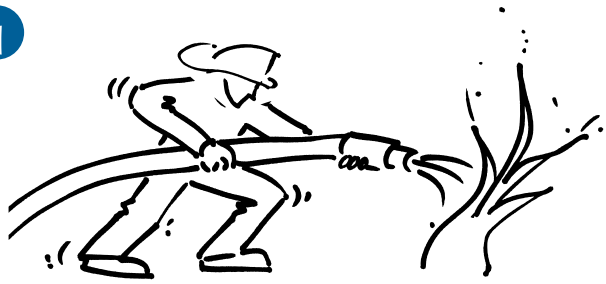
From Fighting Fires to Innovation: An Analogy for Learning

Learning is an essential attribute of high-performing organizations. Effective, well-deployed organizational learning can help an organization improve from the early stages of reacting to problems to the highest levels of organization-wide improvement, refinement, and innovation.

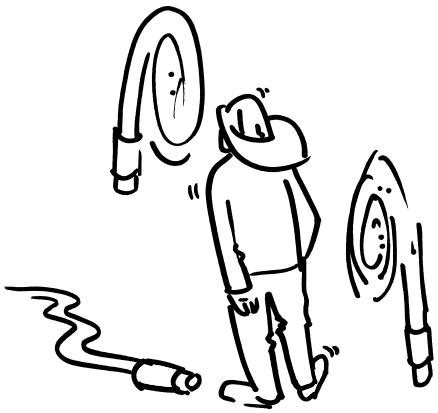
1



Reacting to the problem (0–5%)

Run with the hose and put out the fire.

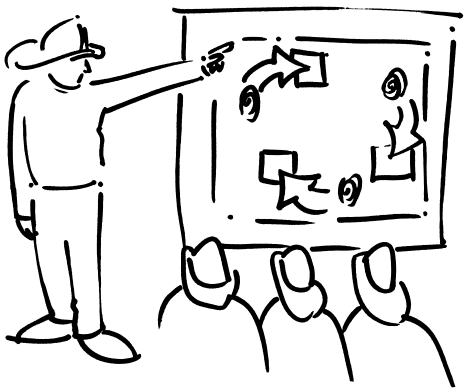
2



General improvement orientation (10–25%)

Install more fire hoses to get to the fires quickly and reduce their impact.

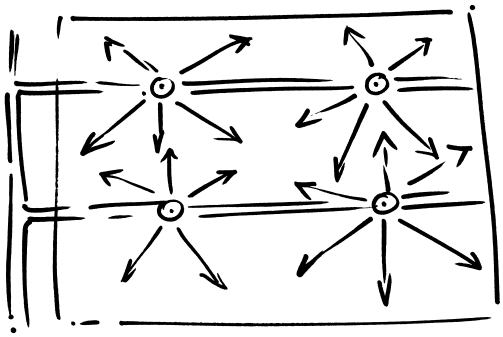
3



Systematic evaluation and improvement (30–45%)

Evaluate which locations are most susceptible to fire. Install heat sensors and sprinklers in those locations.

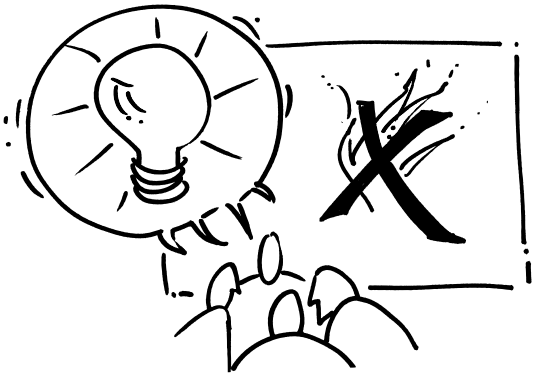
4



Learning and strategic improvement (50–65%)

Install systemwide heat sensors and a sprinkler system that is activated by the heat preceding fires.

5



Organizational analysis and innovation (70–100%)

Use fireproof and fire-retardant materials. Replace combustible liquids with water-based liquids. Prevention is the primary approach for protection, with sensors and sprinklers as the secondary line of protection.

From Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013, 2013–2014 Criteria for Performance Excellence (Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology, http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/business_nonprofit_criteria.cfm).