

ITIL Guiding Principles for Continual Improvement

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Practical guidance
February 2019

1. Introduction

ITIL outlines seven guiding principles that can be used to guide an organization in all circumstances, regardless of changes in its goals, strategies, type of work, or management structure.

The seven ITIL guiding principles are:

- Focus on value
- Start where you are
- Progress iteratively with feedback
- Collaborate and promote visibility
- Think and work holistically
- Keep it simple and practical
- Optimize and automate

The guiding principles and the continual improvement model are both important parts of the ITIL service value system (SVS) that are applicable to all of the other SVS components, ensuring that the SVS as a whole operates with integrity and agility.

The continual improvement model provides simple and logical steps for an improvement initiative of any scale, and the guiding principles help in this by supporting good decision making at every step of the process.

From the ITIL Foundation core guidance:

Section 4.3: The ITIL guiding principles

The guiding principles ... embody the core messages of ITIL and of service management in general, supporting successful actions and good decisions of all types and at all levels. They can be used to guide organizations in their work as they adopt a service management approach and adapt ITIL guidance to their own specific needs and circumstances. The guiding principles encourage and support organizations in continual improvement at all levels.

Section 4.6: Continual improvement

The ITIL continual improvement model can be used as a high-level guide to support improvement initiatives. Use of the model increases the likelihood that ITSM initiatives will be successful, puts a strong focus on customer value, and ensures that improvement efforts can be linked back to the organization's vision. The model supports an iterative approach to improvement, dividing work into manageable pieces with separate goals that can be achieved incrementally.



Figure 1: The continual improvement model

ITIL Foundation highlights which guiding principles are most relevant for each step of the continual improvement model. However, all principles can be helpful to some extent at every step of an improvement initiative. The following table explains how the ITIL guiding principles can be applied to each improvement step.

	FOCUS ON VALUE	START WHERE YOU ARE	PROGRESS ITERATIVELY WITH FEEDBACK	COLLABORATE AND PROMOTE VISIBILITY	THINK AND WORK HOLISTICALLY	KEEP IT SIMPLE AND PRACTICAL	OPTIMIZE AND AUTOMATE
WHAT IS THE VISION?	The definition of the target state should be focused on the value that can be created for the stakeholders, rather than on outputs.	The vision should use the current state as a baseline, and should be realistic and efficient.	It is not always easy to form a shared vision from the first attempt at an improvement. A focus group of stakeholders should be formed and the vision refined based on their feedback.	The vision should be communicated to all stakeholders and it should be demonstrated how the target state will be of value to them.	The vision should address all stakeholders and all four dimensions of service management, and be aligned with other ongoing and planned improvements.	The vision should be concise, easy to understand and based on the actual stakeholders' needs.	Activities to define the vision of the improvement initiative should be optimized wherever possible. Avoid bureaucracy, and be sure not to turn this into a formal exercise.
WHERE ARE WE NOW?	While assessing the current state, focus on the outcomes and value for stakeholders. Don't limit the assessment to only technical or procedural matters.	Make sure that the current practices are sufficiently understood, as well as their strengths and weaknesses relevant to the improvement being planned.	Even during assessment, multiple iterations and regular feedback can help to form a better understanding of the current state. Make sure this understanding is shared among the relevant stakeholders.	Make sure that all relevant stakeholders are involved in the assessment and that assessment methods and results are visible to all. Provide visibility of any grey areas where the current state is not fully understood, should such areas exist.	The understanding of the current state should be holistic in terms of the scope, depth and complexity of the system. Limited and fragmented assessment may mislead the improvement initiative.	Holistic does not mean overcomplicated. Base the assessment of the current state on the needs and vision of the improvement initiative. Include what is needed for improvement and planning and avoid unnecessary details. Present the assessment report in a clear and concise way so that all stakeholders can make informed decisions.	Assessment may take a lot of time and effort. Make sure that the assessment is made using relevant and sufficient data, and where possible automate data collection and processing. At the same time, don't disregard direct observation and narrative techniques. Follow other guiding principles when optimizing assessment.

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WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE?	All measurable objectives of the improvement should be based on the vision and linked to the expected outcomes of the improvement. These outcomes should be cascaded to measurable outputs with clear links to the value proposition. Objectives that are too generic and disconnected should be avoided.	Improvement objectives should be based on the assessment of the current state. It helps to keep these realistic and measurable.	Plan for iterative improvements. Do set higher-level objectives, but always support them with shorter-term objectives for the immediate steps of improvement. Be ready to adjust the higher-level objectives based on progress and feedback.	Agree the improvement objectives with the stakeholders, including the teams which will be involved. Make sure the targets set are understood and accepted by everyone. Discuss feedback and agree any proposed changes to the objectives.	Make sure that the improvement objectives sufficiently reflect the scope of the vision and address all four dimensions of service management. Align the objectives to the assessment of the current state to make sure that all key improvement opportunities are addressed.	Keep your objectives SMART; remember that an objective is not a formal exercise, but a practical step in a real-life improvement. Make sure that there is a shared understanding of the objectives among those involved and affected.	Consider a common objective structure for different types of improvement initiative (service/practice/value stream improvements, etc.). Agree on a simple procedure for objectives setting, discussion, approval, and updating. Avoid lengthy meetings and mail threads. Use collaboration tools where relevant.
HOW DO WE GET THERE?	Be aware of how every improvement action that is planned contributes to the improvement, and map all actions to the improvement objectives. Prioritize improvement actions based on their contribution to the outcomes.	Plan improvement actions based on the current state assessment. Identify opportunities for quick wins. Understand any bottlenecks and address them in the most sensible order.	Plan small measurable actions, assess results, and adjust the plans accordingly. Make sure that sufficient feedback is gathered from the system, including relevant stakeholders. Continually assess and adjust your action plans.	Make sure that action plans are understood and accepted by all relevant stakeholders. Share progress, feedback and changes, and use tools such as Kanban to ensure this is visible. Optimize the workflow of the improvement in collaboration with the teams involved.	Make sure that improvement objectives are sufficiently reflected in the improvement action plans. Don't focus on one or two dimensions of service management, locations or other areas. Avoid local optimization.	Improvement actions should not be complex projects. Simple, realistic steps with clear outputs should be defined, and the action plan should be communicated in clear language. Focus on the practical aspects of the improvement actions, and avoid lengthy bureaucratic jargon.	Optimize improvement planning with relevant techniques such as Kanban, and support this with automation tools where it makes sense. Regardless of the techniques and tools used, ensure there is a simple, collaborative and friendly environment for the continual planning of improvement actions.

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TAKE ACTION	When improvement actions are implemented, it is still important to maintain a focus on their value. Use methods and approaches that have higher value potential. Refer to the vision statement, objectives and KPIs defined for the improvement to make sure that they are consistent with the actions being taken.	Make sure that improvement actions are realistic and effective in the current context. Consider available resources, other ongoing initiatives, and the attitude of those participating in the improvement.	Make sure to capture and analyse feedback, and where appropriate adjust the improvement action accordingly. Ensure that there is a feedback loop between actions taken and actions planned.	Capture and visualize progress information, and make sure it is visible to all relevant stakeholders. Capture successful and less successful practices for lessons and future planning.	Don't manage improvement actions in isolation. Consider them in the context of the organization and of the wider programme. Make sure each action contributes to the vision and the objectives of the improvement.	Make improvement actions a part of people's normal work, and don't overcomplicate them. Try to position improvement work as natural and everyday, rather than something special and separate from core work. Avoid micromanagement, and let teams define their own best ways to perform improvement actions.	Apply optimization techniques to improvement actions, and make sure that they are implemented in an efficient and effective way. Where it makes sense, consider automation, especially for repetitive tasks.
DID WE GET THERE?	When defining key metrics for an improvement initiative, make sure they are outcome-based. Specific technical metrics can be useful, but should be mapped to the outcomes and value for stakeholders. Don't use sample metrics from books and other external sources without mapping them correctly to the improvement initiative, and only where appropriate.	Define improvement metrics based on realistically available data, and avoid measurements that are too complex. Focus on a few key metrics that are essential for decision-making.	Make sure that measurements and reports are valid. Combine different methods to validate the data. Collect feedback from stakeholders, and make sure that they understand and use reports and dashboards. Adjust measurements and presentation based on the feedback.	Make sure key indicators of the improvement initiative are visible to all relevant stakeholders. Make sure that they understand and use this information, encourage discussions, highlight deviations, and celebrate achievements.	Make sure that measurement and reporting sufficiently covers the initiative. Include metrics for all four dimensions of service management and all aspects of the initiative (such as effectiveness, efficiency, compliance, and performance).	Even when there are many metrics in use, make sure that the presentation is clear, concise and unambiguous. Avoid large, multi-page reports, and instead use clear and accessible dashboards with appropriate and up-to-date key indicators. These should be designed to support decision-making, rather than analysis paralysis.	Continually monitor the use and effectiveness of the improvement measurement and reporting. Eliminate excessive metrics, and automate data gathering and processing. Re-use measurement and reporting methods and tools for multiple improvement initiatives.

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HOW DO WE KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING?	<p>Improvement should be continual. When one initiative is completed, others should be planned and implemented. The key driver for this continuity and the key criteria for the selection of initiatives should be potential value for stakeholders. Review current and accomplished initiatives from this point of view, and market new initiatives and correct improvement methods to maximize value.</p>	<p>Review, assessment of lessons learned, marketing and promotion, and changes to the improvement practice, should not wait until the initiative is complete. Instead, these activities should start in parallel with the ongoing initiative, demonstrating progress and inspiring the stakeholders, as well as capturing feedback.</p>	<p>Development of the continual improvement practice, as well as the marketing and promotion of the improvement, should be based on stakeholders' feedback and adjusted to address this feedback. Avoid huge initiatives with delayed effect, and use shorter iterations in both promotion of success and correction of errors.</p>	<p>Collaboration and visibility are critical for keeping the momentum of the improvement going. Involve stakeholders in the marketing of improvements, make information about improvements widely available and encourage all stakeholder groups to come up with new improvement initiatives. Credit the most active contributors, and recognize and promote their attitude and results.</p>	<p>Don't limit improvement programmes and their marketing to one product, team, or location. Communicate and share experience across the organization, involving consumers and partners where appropriate. Share lessons learned across the organization, to inspire improvements in all four dimensions of service management and all products and services.</p>	<p>Establish simple, straightforward procedures for sharing information, proposing new initiatives, and capturing and addressing flaws. Make interfaces for all stakeholders accessible, practical and easy to use. Ensure great user experience for those involved in continual improvement.</p>	<p>Continually optimize how knowledge is captured and managed to ensure that the continual improvement practice is efficient and transparent. Avoid bureaucracy and a formalistic approach wherever possible. Use automation to capture new initiatives and feedback, to provide transparency, and to improve collaboration.</p>

2. Conclusion

The continual improvement model is applicable to all types of improvement initiatives, from minor service or operation improvements, to major organizational changes. The subjects and techniques of the improvement may change, however the approach remains universal, and so do the guiding principles. The above table provides a basic overview of how the guiding principles can apply to each step of the continual improvement model, but remember that the details, and the level of applicability of the principles at every step of improvement may vary. The above information is not meant to be used as a prescriptive list, instead, organizations should apply it as needed with an understanding of their own situation and context.

When an organization is establishing its own continual improvement practice, it should always keep each of the guiding principles in mind, as they are a great help in planning and managing an effective improvement. Continual improvement is the beating heart of service management, and by understanding and following the guiding principles, an organization can maximise its chances for continual improvement success.

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About this Practical Guidance

This guidance details how the ITIL guiding principles can be applied to improvement initiatives in conjunction with the continual improvement model.

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