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## CASE STUDY

# How a Distribution Company Built a Culture of Continuous Improvement That Actually Stuck

**Industry:** Industrial Distribution | **Revenue:** \$30 Million | **Employees:** 150

## The Situation

This was a company that had grown steadily for years, and on the surface things looked healthy. Underneath, though, leadership was frustrated. Every time they launched an improvement initiative, it started with energy and then quietly faded. When I talked with employees, they had a name for it: “flavor of the month.”

That phrase tells you everything. It wasn’t that the team couldn’t change — it was that they had learned, through experience, that change never lasted. So engagement was low, resistance was high, and people kept their heads down. Day to day, that showed up as process variation and recurring inventory problems that no one felt ownership for solving.

The honest truth is that the previous efforts didn’t fail because the tools were wrong. They failed because they were handed down instead of built up. People support what they help create, and no one had ever really invited them in.

## What We Did

We led with leadership, not with tools — and we put servant leadership at the center of everything. The message to managers was simple: your job is to develop your people and remove their obstacles, not just to police the numbers. When people feel that, ownership follows, and ownership is what makes improvement permanent.

**Lean leadership development** We developed the leaders first, so the people setting the tone actually understood how to coach improvement rather than command it.

**A Kaizen system people owned** We built a simple, structured way for any employee to surface a problem and propose a fix — and then we made sure those ideas were heard and acted on.

**Daily management and visual boards** Performance became visible to everyone, every day. When a team can see how it’s doing, improvement stops being an event and becomes a habit.

**Leader coaching** We coached supervisors continually, reinforcing the new behaviors until they became simply “how we do things here.”

## The Results

Within 18 months, the culture had genuinely shifted — and the results made that shift undeniable.

- Employee-generated improvement ideas increased 400%. People weren’t waiting to be told anymore; they were leading.
- Inventory accuracy improved from 89% to 98%.

- Productivity increased 21%.
- Employee turnover decreased 34% — people stay where they feel ownership and respect.
- Annual savings exceeded \$1.1 million.

*“This was the first improvement initiative that actually stuck.”*

— Operations Leader

## The Takeaway

Continuous improvement isn't a toolkit you install — it's a culture you build. And culture is built through leadership, trust, and genuine ownership.

When people help create the change, they protect it. That's the difference between an initiative that fades by spring and one that becomes part of who you are.

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