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Continuous Improvement — Not Just a Slogan

Anchor Point software, Linda Jones, and you

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Continuous Improvement (CI) is a structured DTE Energy corporate program employing highly trained personnel with expertise in analyzing departmental functioning and efficiency. They use those analyses to develop customized plans to improve that functioning and efficiency. But you don't have to be a CI *Black Belt* to participate in continuous improvement. It also involves front-line people like Substations executive assistant Linda Jones who see opportunities for cost-savings or enhanced productivity and take an interest.

Linda became aware of a companywide administrative tool, *Anchor Point* expense management software. This tool enables the Information Technology (IT) team to monitor all corporate communications expenses including Blackberries, cellphones, pagers, land lines, network air cards, and modems. In 2010 Ms. Jones initiated a Substations communications-cost audit. She uncovered \$45,000 in savings by targeting waste such as mismatched or overpriced network provider plans and open accounts no longer needed.

In 2011 Substations partnered with IT to continue the auditing process by monitoring individual communications accounts from the first to last day of each contract. They identified potential cost-saving account changes (cancellations, downgrades, etc.) and made these changes immediately instead of racking up unnecessary charges. Simultaneously, Substations leaders were trained in *Anchor Point* software. (Remember, this tool is available to the entire company.) That training now enables those leaders to monitor their own unit's expenses, in conjunction with normal auditing procedures. When one of those expenses exceeds an established monthly norm, an inquiry can be initiated to determine the cause. Waste is eliminated rather than perpetuated — and, in this case, with no hit to anyone's comfort zone.

Audits for 2011 produced significant positive results in addition to 2010's initial waste-trimming accomplishment. Though legitimate new service accounts mask ongoing spending improvements, Substations is projecting a 10 percent savings in 2012 expenditures for communications. Linda Jones saw an opportunity for improvement, and she acted on it.

This story illustrates how any team member can identify and initiate positive change for improved corporate functioning. It benefits everyone — employees, customers, shareholders, everyone. CI wants to work with and learn from anyone in the company with a better idea. CI staff have had focused training in this area. And DTE Energy front-line people have a focused view of their area because they see the gears turn every working day. The goal is to combine input from these equally valuable sources for maximum benefit to our people and our company. ■