

7 Principles of Operational Excellence That Actually Stick

The short, honest version of what I've learned making improvements hold after the consultant has gone. No jargon — just the principles that survive contact with a real operation.

Operational excellence has a marketing problem: it's been buried under frameworks and acronyms until it sounds like something you buy. It isn't. It's a handful of plain ideas, applied with discipline, over a long time. Here are the seven I keep coming back to.

PRINCIPLE 01

Fix the process, not the person.

When something goes wrong, the reflex is to find who to blame. Almost always, a capable person was let down by a process that made the error easy and the right thing hard. Fix the process and the "people problem" tends to dissolve. Blame the person and you learn nothing.

PRINCIPLE 02

Standardise before you automate.

Automating a messy, undefined process just gives you a faster mess that's now harder to see into. Get the work stable and standard first — one clear way that reliably works — *then* automate that. Order matters.

PRINCIPLE 03

Make the work visible.

You cannot improve what you cannot see. Most operational waste hides in waiting, hand-offs, and rework that no dashboard captures. Get the real flow onto a wall or a board where everyone can see where things stick. Visibility is half the fix.

PRINCIPLE 04

Measure what the customer feels.

It's easy to measure what's easy to measure — activity, utilisation, output. But the customer feels time, reliability, and quality. Pick the two or three measures that track *their* experience, and be suspicious of metrics that look great while customers complain.

PRINCIPLE 05

Improvement is owned, not delegated.

Improvement that's handed to a separate "improvement team" and taken off everyone else's plate never sticks. The people who do the work have to own making it better, with leadership visibly backing them. Otherwise the old way quietly returns the moment attention moves on.

PRINCIPLE 06

Automate the boring, not the broken.

The right things to automate are the dull, repetitive, high-volume tasks that drain good people — not the judgement calls and exceptions that need a human. Aim automation at freeing people for the work only they can do, not at replacing the thinking.

PRINCIPLE 07

It isn't done until it sticks.

The hardest part of any improvement isn't making the change — it's making it survive. New habits decay under pressure and revert to the old way. Build in the checks, the ownership, and the visible measures that hold the gain. An improvement that fades wasn't finished; it was just demonstrated.

IF YOU REMEMBER ONE THING

None of this is complicated. That's the point. Operational excellence isn't a project you finish or a tool you install — it's a way of working you keep choosing. The organisations that get it aren't the ones with the cleverest frameworks. They're the ones that stayed disciplined about the simple things long after everyone else got bored.

If any of this resonates with a problem you're wrestling with, that's the work I do — turning tangled operations into systems that deliver, and making the improvement hold. I'm always happy to talk it through.