

Continuous Improvement Manager interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for a continuous improvement manager focus on how you apply Lean and Six Sigma in real production settings, how you bring operators and supervisors along, and how you make gains stick. Employers want to see structured thinking, data literacy and the ability to influence without direct authority.

- **Process and methodology:** Questions about how you run kaizen events, apply DMAIC, choose the right tool for a problem, or structure an improvement project from start to finish.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of leading change, overcoming resistance, or delivering cost and quality improvements in a manufacturing environment.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical production issues, such as a line missing targets or a new process causing defects, where you talk through your approach step by step.
- **Technical and data:** How you use Minitab, Excel or Tableau to analyse production data, interpret metrics and decide which projects to prioritise.
- **Stakeholder and influence:** How you work with production supervisors, operators, engineers and maintenance teams to gain buy-in and sustain new standards.
- **Safety and compliance:** How you assess WHS risks when changing a process, and how you ensure improvements align with quality management systems such as AS/NZS ISO 9001.

Typically a phone screen with a recruiter or hiring manager, then a face-to-face or panel interview with the plant manager and a production or engineering lead. Some employers include a short practical exercise, such as reviewing a process map or a set of production data and suggesting improvements. The panel will probe your methods, your ability to influence without authority, and how you make improvements stick.

1. Walk me through how you would run a kaizen event from start to finish.

Why they ask

This tests your practical grasp of a core continuous improvement method and whether you can structure a project that delivers real change on the floor.

How to structure your answer

A walk-through structure: define the scope and baseline data, select a cross-functional team, map the current state, identify waste, prioritise quick wins and longer actions, implement and test, then standardise and follow up.

Example answer

"I start by defining the problem with data, so the team knows what we are trying to move. I pick a focused area, like a changeover on one line, and pull together operators, a supervisor, maintenance and sometimes an engineer. On day one we map the current process, time each step and mark value-added versus non-value-added. We identify the biggest waste, often waiting or motion, and brainstorm fixes. We prioritise actions we can trial straight away, like moving tools closer or changing the sequence of tasks. We run the trial, measure the result, and if it works we write a standard operating procedure and train everyone on it. I then set up a visual board to track the new time and check back weekly until it is stable. The key is that operators own the changes, because they know the work best."

2. Tell me about a time you led an improvement project that faced resistance from the production team.

Why they ask

Continuous improvement depends on buy-in from the people who run the line, so employers want to see how you handle pushback and turn scepticism into ownership.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Keep the situation brief, focus on the specific actions you took to listen, involve and demonstrate value, then state the result.

Example answer

"In a previous role, I proposed a new standard work sequence for an assembly cell, but the long-standing operators felt it would slow them down. My task was to improve output without damaging morale. I started by spending a shift alongside them, asking what frustrated them about the current process. I found that one step required an awkward reach, so we adjusted the layout together. I ran a small trial on one shift, measured the cycle time, and showed the team the result on a board. Once they saw it was faster and less tiring, they helped refine the standard. We rolled it out across the cell, and the improvement held because they had shaped it. The resistance faded when they saw I was there to make their work easier, not to impose a textbook answer."

3. You notice a production line is consistently missing its output target, but the operators say nothing is wrong. How do you approach it?

Why they ask

This scenario tests your judgement under pressure, your data instincts and your ability to engage people who may be defensive or simply used to the current state.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: stay calm, acknowledge their view, gather your own data, look for a specific bottleneck, bring operators into the analysis, test a small change, and review the result together.

Example answer

"I would not confront them. I would thank them for their perspective and say I want to understand the line better. I would pull the production data for the last week, looking at cycle times, downtime reasons and scrap. I would also stand on the line and observe, not to catch anyone out but to see where work waits. Often there is a hidden issue, like a supplier delivering slightly out of spec or a machine that needs minor adjustment. I would bring the operators into a short problem-solving session, share the data, and ask what they see. We would pick one likely cause, test a change, and measure the effect. If output improves, they own the win. If not, we learn something and try again. The goal is to make the problem visible and solve it together, not to prove anyone wrong."

4. How do you decide which improvement project to prioritise when you have several competing opportunities?

Why they ask

Continuous improvement managers rarely have unlimited resources, so employers want to see how you use data and business context to choose projects that deliver the most value.

How to structure your answer

A criteria-based structure: list the factors you weigh, such as impact on safety, cost, quality and delivery, alignment with plant goals, ease of implementation, and data confidence. Then explain how you score or discuss them with leadership.

Example answer

"I start by understanding the plant's main pain points and goals. If safety is the top priority, a project that reduces a manual handling risk may outrank a cost saving. I then look at the data for each opportunity: what is the gap to target, how much waste is involved, and how confident am I in the

baseline. I consider the effort required, because a quick win can build momentum. I usually create a simple matrix with impact and effort, and discuss it with the plant manager and production leads. For example, if one project could cut scrap by a significant margin but needs capital approval, and another could reduce changeover time with no spend, I might run the changeover project first to free up capacity while the capital case is built. The decision is about sequencing, not just ranking, so we keep improving while bigger projects are in the pipeline.”

5. How do you get supervisors and operators to buy into a new standard operating procedure?

Why they ask

This probes your stakeholder management and your understanding that sustainable improvement depends on the people who do the work every day.

How to structure your answer

Explain your approach step by step: involve them in writing the standard, explain the why, pilot it, train on it, use visual management, and follow up to adjust.

Example answer

“I never write a standard in isolation. I start by sitting with the operators and supervisors who do the task, and we draft the steps together. That way the standard reflects how the work is actually done safely and efficiently. I explain why we are changing: what problem it solves, what data shows the current way is causing waste or risk. We pilot the new standard on one shift, watch for issues, and tweak it. Once it is stable, I train everyone, using a one-point lesson and a visual board at the workstation. I also ask supervisors to observe and give feedback in the first week, because they are the ones who reinforce it. If someone finds a better way, we update the standard. That keeps it alive instead of becoming a document that sits in a folder.”

6. How do you ensure a process change does not introduce a new WHS risk?

Why they ask

Safety is non-negotiable in manufacturing, and employers want to know you consider WHS and quality compliance as part of every improvement, not as an afterthought.

How to structure your answer

A risk management structure: identify hazards, assess risk, consult with workers and WHS representatives, trial with controls, review and document.

Example answer

“Before any change goes live, I run a risk assessment with the operators and the WHS representative. We look at what could go wrong: new manual handling, chemical exposure, machine guarding, ergonomics, or traffic in the area. I use the hierarchy of controls to eliminate or minimise the risk, and we trial the change under supervision. If a new step creates a reach or a repetitive movement, we adjust the layout or rotate tasks. I also check that the change does not affect quality compliance, so we review it against our AS/NZS ISO 9001 procedures if needed. After implementation, I check back with the team to see if any new issues have appeared. Safety and quality are part of the improvement, not separate from it. If we cannot make the change safe, we do not make it.”