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The business environment is constantly changing, and organizations increasingly need the ability to adapt and respond to the opportunities and threats in their external environments. Whether it's a new regulation, a new competitor, a new channel or even a new product – organizations need to be able to respond effectively and often there may be a need for them to flex and change extremely quickly. Quite rightly, there is a perennial focus on organizational efficiency and effectiveness. In some cases organizations may initiate projects to implement major change within the company. These projects may involve wide-ranging changes to the process, as well as changes to any supporting technology and even the structure of the business itself.

Whilst large scale "transformational" change projects will be necessary in some cases, it is important that we don't overlook the aggregate value of many smaller changes. The pursuit of "quick wins" is often seen as a tactical activity – far away from the lofty revolutionary 'strategic' projects that feature in glossy end-of-quarter reports. Yet the ability to make these quick, tactical changes may mean that the organization can respond more quickly to its environment, gaining real competitive advantage in the shorter term—buying time for implementation of longer term strategic change where necessary. In this article we examine the benefit of empowering those that know the detailed process and tasks best to make managed incremental changes. Empowering those that do the work.

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Empowerment starts with vision

Continuous improvement through the empowerment of front line workers is not a new idea, and similar practices have been adopted by companies the world over. Yet it could be argued that whilst some organizations have chosen to embrace the spirit of these ideas, others have embraced them in name only.

One vital piece of the puzzle that it would be easy to overlook is the importance of the bigger picture. It's vital that we ensure that even the smallest of changes is aligned with the overall strategic direction that the organization is aiming for. It's essential that every change delivers value. This starts by ensuring that there is an overall shared vision throughout the business, and a common and consistent view on the company's overriding objectives. Put simple, how can continuous improvement work if there isn't a shared vision of where the organization is trying to get to, who its customers are and what its value proposition consists of? This highlights the importance of achieving a shared view on the value that an organization is aiming to deliver, as well as the criticality of communicating the organization's vision, mission and objectives.

Vision and mission statements are often maligned. In fact, some would argued that these terms have become so clichéd that they sound like corporate doublespeak—buzzwords that wouldn't look out of place in a game of 'buzzword bingo'. Yet if they are well written and well communicated, they can help keep teams on the same page—they can help drive clarity and engagement and a focus on value. Sadly, in some companies, mission and vision statements exist but they are buried away in new starter manuals or seventeen links deep on a cryptic corporate intranet. It is crucial that these useful artefacts are brought to the fore, and it's essential to ensure that these vision and mission statements are supported by clear strategies and objectives that are meaningful to people throughout the organization. Everyone needs to know how their efforts contribute to or support the overall strategic direction towards the mission. It is essential that these factors are kept in mind when considering any kind of business process improvement initiative—this helps ensure that the right processes are improved in an appropriate way.

Additionally, it is important that information about an organization's value proposition is clearly communicated and understood. It's important that everyone in the company knows which market we're competing in, who our customers are, what value we deliver to our customers and how we position ourselves against our competitors. Else, any improvements that are made might be in conflict with this value—this is illustrated with the hypothetical example below:

Hypothetical Example:

Let's assume a budget hotel is focussed on keeping its operating costs as low as possible, and these costs are kept low (in part) by having fewer staff than equivalent hotels elsewhere. In this case, speeding up processes like check-in would be extremely beneficial as it would release staff for other duties. Therefore, minimising the amount of steps, forms and the amount of data processed during check-in would be beneficial. Perhaps the hotel might even consider a fully automated check-in solution, where the hotel guest checks themselves in at a self-service terminal.

This would be in stark contrast with a full-service hotel. In a full-service hotel, whilst speed of check in may well also be a priority, there may be more of a focus on anticipating the customer's needs. Perhaps this would involve booking them a slot in the restaurant, recommending local tourist attractions or telling them about the in-house facilities. In this case, it might be useful for the front-desk to have access to more data about the customer so that they can accurately anticipate their needs. The focus may be on provision of service rather than minimizing customer contact time. There may even be an appetite to provide more check-in staff, if this means that there is more of an opportunity to anticipate and meet the customer's needs.

This difference in value proposition, with different attitudes of price vs service is important, and it's crucial that stakeholders throughout the organization are on the same page. Else an organization may end up with processes that do not support the value proposition being offered.

This relentless pursuit of both business and customer value—from the top to the bottom of the organization—binds together teams and helps ensure that the changes made to processes and systems are appropriate and consistent. Shared vision is crucial.

Incremental change through empowerment: The importance of knowledge.

Having established a clear, consistent and well-communicated understanding of the company's vision and objectives, it is possible to encourage staff throughout the organization to consider how they might improve the processes that they work in day-in and day-out. Often stakeholders throughout the organization will be brimming with ideas—in some cases workers on the front line may have lists of improvement opportunities that they have been compiling for years. There may not have been an avenue for these opportunities to be explored up until now. Some individual changes might be tiny, but in aggregate the changes may yield a significant benefit for the company and its customers.

However, simply sending a memo encouraging people to "improve the way they work" is unlikely to bear fruit. It's important to retain a laser-like focus on the pursuit of value – both to the business and to the customer – that we are trying to attain. It would be undesirable to make a tactical change in one area if this caused problems elsewhere.

For this reason, it is important to create a way for everyone in the organization to understand the part they play in serving the customer. It's important that everyone understands the current end-to-end process that they take part in. Encouraging this end-to-end thinking is key, and in some organizations it might represent quite a cultural change. It may be necessary to break down communication barriers between silos, or even to change the way work is measured to encourage this kind of thinking. These types of cultural and communication challenges are beyond the scope of this paper, but are worth considering nevertheless. On a practical level, business process artefacts should be shared between teams and functions and, for this, it can be extremely useful to create a common repository containing all the relevant information. It's also essential that these processes are documented in a common notation that everyone understands.

At this point, it's worth reflecting on a further point relating to training and vocabulary: As a reader of this paper you almost certainly know what a 'business process' is. In fact, you've probably spent weeks analysing and documenting processes over the years, and could draw a BPMN diagram in your sleep. Yet many business stakeholders we work with are experts in the execution of their part of the process, but they might not realise they are part of an end-to-end process at all! In fact, some stakeholders might not even be familiar with the term "process" or they may confuse terms like "job", "activity", "process" and "procedure".

For this reason, before encouraging those at the front-line of the organization to suggest or implement incremental changes, it is worth

considering whether some form of appropriate training would be beneficial. This doesn't have to be expensive, and it can often be led by internal experts. In fact, it is often possible to train a number of 'process champions' throughout the organization and to allow these people to act as key reference points. It will be important to ensure that these people have a clear grasp of process improvement, and are also able to look above the individual tasks that they and their team undertake (You may like to refer to the previous Orbus white paper "Experience your process from the Outside In"). It will also be important that they are familiar with the typical ways that a process can be improved.

With knowledge of business process theory and an appreciation for end-to-end thinking embedded, it's time to start collecting and evaluating suggestions for improvement.

Capturing suggestions

Having imparted knowledge about the vision, objectives and having embedded sufficient knowledge about process improvement, it's possible to start encouraging people to consider and suggest how to improve their work. Many different approaches to front-line continuous and incremental improvement have been suggested over the years, from lean's Andon concept – where a worker can stop production when a problem is held – through to daily stand-up meetings where problems and opportunities are discussed, and many, many more besides.

Whichever approach is taken, it is essential that it is:

- **Open:** Any worker has the opportunity to raise an idea for improvement, irrespective of their grade or status.

- **Fair:** That improvement ideas are evaluated fairly and taken seriously.

- **Holistic:** That each opportunity is considered in terms of the impact it will have to the individual task, the overall end-to-end process and the organization and end-customer.

- **Value focussed:** Focusses on delivery of value to the customer and organization, and is aligned with the organization's direction and objectives.

- **Transparent:** The individuals that raise a change get transparent and honest feedback. If something cannot be implemented, this should be explained and the reasons should be provided.

- **Timely:** The evaluation of an idea should be quick; there is nothing more disconcerting than feeding a suggestion into a 'black hole' and hearing 15 months later that no action has been taken.

An organization might choose to start small, perhaps simply by having a suggestion box where people can submit their ideas. Creating a short form can ensure that people focus on not just the suggestion, but also the root problem/opportunity it is addressing. An example is shown overleaf.

Suggestion for Improvement	
Your Name:	
Department or Team:	
Contact Number/E-mail:	
Your Suggestion	
Suggestion Please outline your suggestion. Please be as specific as possible.	
Problem What problem or opportunity would this address? Who does it affect? What is the size of the problem? What data has been examined/is available?	
Resources What tools or resources would you need to make it happen?	
Customer/Business Benefit What would be the benefit to us and our customers? How many cases per day/week/month would be affected? What data have you examined, what data is available?	
Impact What would the impact be on other teams, particularly those that send us work, or receive our work? Are there any other stakeholders who would be impacted?	
Other Ideas Are there any other ways of solving the problem/addressing the opportunity?	

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It can be useful to convene a group to regularly prioritize and triage ideas and suggestions that are put forward. The existing end-to-end process should be examined to see whether there are any knock-on impacts. The 'process champions' mentioned earlier will often be well placed to consider these impacts. As part of the triage, consideration should be put into the size and breadth of the change, the cost and the likely benefits. This may require additional analysis or collection of data.

For small yet impactful changes, with minimal impact outside of the team a decision might be made to trial the change immediately. Ideally, the person who suggested the change would be involved in its implementation or even empowered to get it implemented. They should, of course, be supported with additional resources and expertise if this is needed. Not only this, it is important that they are given 'time out' from their day job to help investigate and pursue the change. Even with smaller scale changes, it can be beneficial to run a small-scale trial first, before rolling out to a larger team. This ensures that any teething problems are identified and dealt with earlier.

It won't be practical to implement all changes in this way. If the proposed change does have wider impacts it may need wider consideration and consultation or even a formal project. Some changes might not be practical at all, and there may be some where the costs outweigh the benefits. Whatever happens, it is desirable to involve the person who suggested the idea in its trial and implementation—this helps show the openness of the improvement process.

Implementation

If it is decided that an incremental change should be implemented, then it's important that any process models and procedure guidelines are updated. There will need to be communication to anyone affected, not just about what the change is but also why it is being made. If the team is having stand-up meetings, this can be a good place for this information to flow. Thought should be put into the timing of implementation; if there are several small changes being implemented it can be beneficial to bundle them up, so people do not feel that they are being bombarded with changes all the time.

However, for a process change to be successful it doesn't just need to be communicated, it also needs to be followed. Thought should be put into how the success of the change can be measured, and also whether it might be possible to make further incremental changes.

The approach outlined above—from capturing suggestions to implementation—is summarised in figure 2 overleaf:
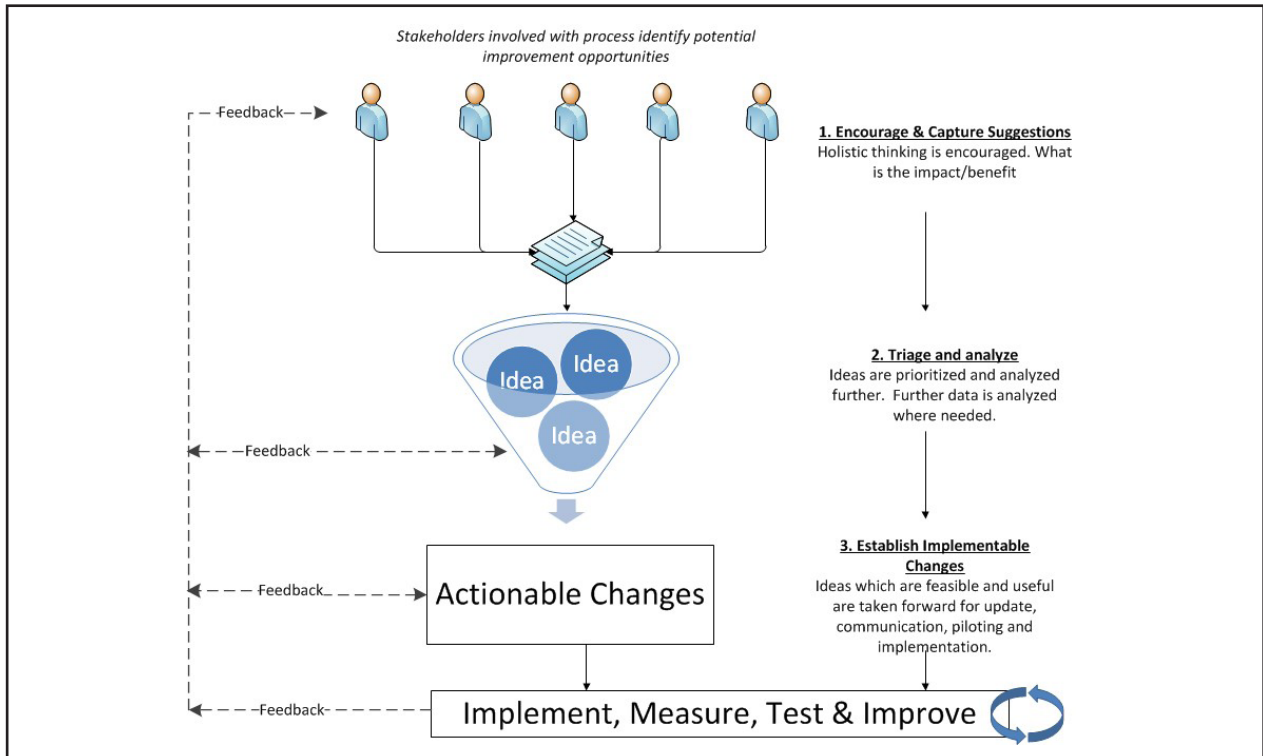

Figure 2: Idea to incremental change   © Blackmetric Business Solutions Ltd, used with permission

Conclusion

Stakeholders who are at the front-line of the organization are often extremely well placed to make small yet extremely impactful changes to the processes they work on.   In order for these changes to be effective it's essential to ensure that there is a shared vision on the type of value that is being pursued. Ensuring that the relevant stakeholders have a firm grounding in the essential facets of business process modelling and improvement can be useful, and creating a clear way for improvements to be suggested can be beneficial.   Where an improvement opportunity is viable it can be extremely beneficial to involve the person who raised it – and where possible to let them champion it. After changes have been implemented, their success should be measured. This continual pursuit of value by empowering those that are involved with the processes ensures that an organization can continually adapt and improve.

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