



eBook

It's Not the Process, it's the Management!



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Introduction

Process improvement initiatives are often launched in response to a specific set of problems, opportunities or needs. Perhaps there is a need to cut costs, to streamline processes so that a new product can be rolled out, or perhaps operational problems have caused an unexpected increase in customer complaints. When these types of initiative are raised, we may initially find that our stakeholders make early implied assumptions over the nature of the root cause or problem. In some cases they may even make an assumption over how it can be solved. Often, there is an unstated and untested assumption that underlying problems lie with a particular area or function. Perhaps it's assumed that the problem lies with IT, or with the sequencing of work in the process itself, or perhaps we find that a single department is (unfairly) singled out.

Of course, there may be some validity in these hypotheses and certainly they provide us with areas that warrant further investigation. Yet business issues can be caused by a wide range of other factors too, including a lack of resources, untrained staff, an unsupportive culture, unsuitable IT systems, inadequate data, and so on. It is important that we examine the situation holistically. In doing so, we may even find that the issue lies not with the process itself, but with the way the process is managed. Process management issues can be extremely tricky to identify and handle but we would be foolhardy to ignore them. They may have originated due to a lack of management support and buy-in, a lack of communication or for a range of other issues. In this eBook, we examine a variety of management issues and discuss how to detect and handle them.



Management not managers

Firstly, it is important to draw the distinction between management and managers. The issues that we allude to in this eBook relate to how the process is managed—irrespective of who undertakes that role. This may, in many cases be somebody with the title ‘manager’. In other cases, the role may be dispersed amongst a group of other team members. It is unlikely that all of the issues outlined in this eBook will be the responsibility of a single manager or leader, and it is likely that a coordinated effort amongst a range of stakeholders will be required to resolve them. In this respect, it is important that when conducting our process analysis work we are not perceived to be levelling unjustified criticism at individual managers. By highlighting issues relating to the organization-wide management of the process, we ensure that managers can make informed decisions on how to proceed and improve their processes.

Process Management Issues

Measurement

It has often been said that “You get what you inspect not what you expect”. This expression highlights a key factor that influences process effectiveness: people tend to focus on things that affect performance measures.

This is completely logical and understandable. If a target has been set, it is natural to want to try to achieve it—especially if the target affects an individual’s remuneration. Yet if insufficient thought has been put into the type of targets that are set and how they are measured, we may inadvertently drive the wrong outcomes. As Kaplan & Norton observed:

“What you measure is what you get. Senior executives understand that their organization’s measurement system strongly affects the behavior of managers and employees. Executives also understand that traditional financial accounting measures [...] can give misleading signals for continuous improvement and innovation—activities today’s competitive environment demands. The traditional financial performance measures worked well for the industrial era, but they are out of step with the skills and competencies companies are trying to master today.” (Kaplan & Norton, 1992)

Poorly set and managed targets can be very blunt instruments indeed, whether they are set at a macro or micro level within the organization. For example, setting a single measure in a call center encouraging staff to achieve an average call length of 4 minutes or less may inadvertently drive bad outcomes for customers and staff – particularly if this is the only ‘blunt’ measure, and measurements are taken and reported every day. Some calls will by their nature be more complex than others. There will be “good days” when the queries all seem simple. There will be “bad days” when everything is complex. These “bad days” may be completely unrelated to staff performance – perhaps an advertising campaign has caused a glut of complex enquiries, or perhaps complex queries are seasonal or happen at certain times of the month.

What should a conscientious worker do on “bad days” where every call is taking 10 plus minutes to clear properly? They may intuitively want to give good customer service, but the organization is measuring them (and encouraging them) to be quick with little regard to quality. This can cause an inner conflict, and over time can lead to a form of passive acceptance and disengagement. And as people are ‘nudged’ by the targets to do the quickest thing (rather than the right thing), customer service suffers. The irony, of course, is that bad customer service creates failure demand – more calls into the queue and longer waiting times than if the issue had been solved right first time.

Resolving these types of issue will require us to work with the relevant stakeholders to define a range of balanced metrics. Developing a balanced scorecard (similar to the type developed by Kaplan & Norton), considering the desired outcomes from varying perspectives and the outcomes that a range of process stakeholder desire will help us define meaningful metrics. It is also important to consider and discuss how often measurements will be made and reported. Daily reporting may be far too frequent in some situations – it may cause knee jerk reactions. Whereas weekly, fortnightly or monthly may be more appropriate. Where metrics are affected by seasonal peaks and troughs it may be more appropriate to compare against the same period last year.

Finally, it is important to consider how the organization will respond if the targets are not met. Asking the staff to “work harder” is unlikely to be a sustainable option, and if performance drastically changes it may be symptomatic of a wider and more systemic issue. This sometimes happens insidiously with performance reducing slowly over a period of time. Setting pro-active trigger points in advance can ensure that we spot, investigate and deal with these issues if they arise.

Is the Organization Supportive?

Inappropriate measures can lead to a culture that focuses on hitting numeric targets rather than satisfying customers and stakeholders. Yet we must examine factors wider than just the process measures themselves. An important question to ask is “do those undertaking the work receive the support that they need to do the job effectively and hit any targets that are assigned?”. This is a broad and varied question, and its relevance will vary depending on the specific industry and business situation, it may include issues related to training, tools and how improvement suggestions are handled.

Training: It is worth establishing whether staff receive adequate training when they join, and whether they receive adequate ongoing development. If they do not, then perhaps part of the root cause of any process issue relates to a genuine lack of knowledge (or an undeveloped skill). If training is given, it is worth considering whether it is up-to-date and extensive enough for the tasks undertaken, and whether it truly helps to develop the professional and practical skills needed.

Staff that have not received adequate training may experience stress as they genuinely do not know how to proceed, and may find it difficult to find the support that they need. This may particularly be the case where staff roles have been widened but little thought has been put into ensuring that the team members receive sufficient support and training both before and during the transition.

Tools: Alongside training, it is also worth considering whether the organization has provided staff with the tools they need to do the job. You would be unlikely to expect a builder to dig a hole without a spade (or a mechanical digger) – yet so often information workers are expected to undertake work without access to relevant data, systems or applications. If a knowledge worker is having to ring 13 different people to get the information they need (even though the information is actually all available internally) then questions need to be asked not only about the underlying data and application architecture, but also about whether authority has been sufficiently delegated (or whether job boundaries are optimally designed). Spending time with the relevant stakeholders to understand and list any tools, systems or applications that are needed but aren’t available can yield potentially useful quick wins that will lead to quick improvements.

Improvement Suggestions: An additional area that warrants our attention is how the organization (and its management) handles individuals who raise issues and suggestions relating to the current process. Smart and supportive organizations will encourage ideation and continuous improvement from all levels – unsupportive organizations, by contrast, may see people raising ideas as ‘trouble makers’ and may marginalize their views. It is often the case that when tools or training have been lacking, staff have been asking for them for years—but their voices have been ignored. This suggests a potential breakdown in communication between stakeholder groups, which is addressed in the next section.

Is Communication Effective?

A perennial issue in many organizations that is equally relevant when considering processes is that of communication. An organization could design the most effective and efficient processes, yet if those undertaking the work never hear about the required changes (and why they are important), the process improvement is very unlikely to smoothly bed in.

It is worth examining how communication works in the organization, and particularly how communication flows between stakeholders. This includes up and down the organization, but also between departments, peers and teams. Identifying communication blockages—or areas where one party thinks they are communicating (but in reality they are just ‘broadcasting’ messages which never really get digested) is key. A useful question to ask of people who send out crucial information in newsletters or circulars is “how are you ensuring that this information is both read and understood” and “how many questions and comments have been raised”. If understanding is not being validated, or if few (or no) queries or suggestions are being raised then this could suggest that the information isn’t being read – or at the very least it isn’t being digested and internalized. It can be valuable to visualize this in a diagram for your own understanding – although diagrams of this type are rarely suitable for wider consumption!

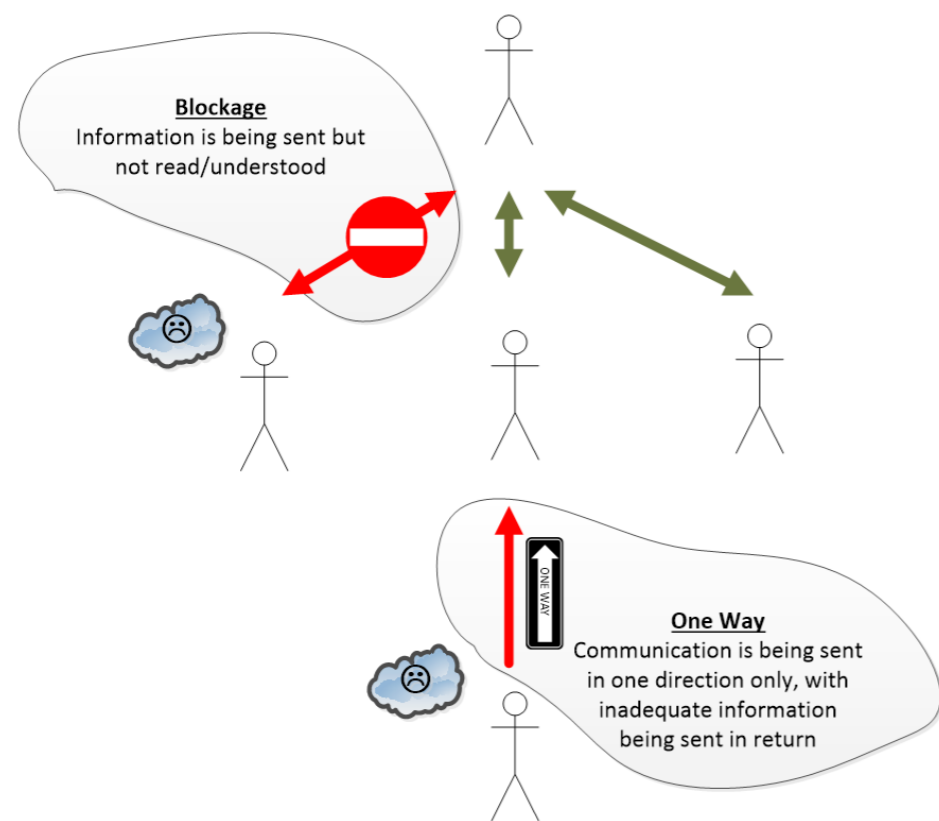


Figure 1: Informal diagrams can help to highlight communication issues



Dealing with communication issues can be very tricky indeed, but it can be useful to start by understanding the channels of communication that work best for each stakeholder type, and also the types of communication that they want (and need) to receive. Often stakeholders are dealing with ‘information overload’, fielding hundreds of e-mails each day. It is important to ensure that relevant information is received, read and understood by key stakeholders. Crucial messages may need to be communicated multiple times, across multiple mediums to be effective and to suit different stakeholders. E-mail, video, letter/desk-dropped newsletters, in-person roadshows, meetings and telephone conversations are just some ways that we might choose.

When communicating information about business processes, it is extremely beneficial to agree a common notation (such as BPMN) that can be understood and read by all relevant stakeholders. Some stakeholders may require initial briefing or training, but once everyone understands the notation there will be a precise and concise ‘shared language’ that enables very complex and precise discussions to be undertaken concisely. This can be enhanced further by ensuring there is a shared repository where process models are held, which ideally allows different ‘views’ of each process to be visualized by different stakeholders. For example, senior stakeholders may want a very high-level macro end-to-end overview, whereas process operators may need a detailed step-by-step guide of a specific task.

In addition to internal communication, it is also worth considering how the organization communicates and consults externally. This is a broad topic, but one specific area of interest is whether customers feel heard, and how we ensure that their views are considered.

How is the voice of the customer fed into operations and changes?

It is clear that customers are key organizational stakeholders. However, we may find that crucial decisions are being made by people that never (or rarely) speak to an actual customer. Worse still, decisions on how to improve or operate a process may be made with a complete lack of insight or data, and may be based on ‘gut feel’ of what customers will like. This can lead to biases slipping in – we may inadvertently end up designing processes in a way that we would like (disregarding what our target or actual customers’ value).

Ensuring that customer feedback is regularly sought, and that suggestions, compliments and complaints are properly logged and considered helps to ensure that we avoid these pitfalls. So often complaints are seen as something to deal with – yet each valid complaint provides a renewed opportunity to delight a customer whilst simultaneously improving our process to prevent future issues and waste. If management are focusing more on “clearing complaints” or “throwing compensation at the problem” then we miss an opportunity.

Furthermore, periodic focus groups/surveys (or other proactive elicitation techniques) will help to ensure that the customer experience is monitored and that any deviations are spotted and can be dealt with.

Power and Politics

The final factor discussed in this eBook is perhaps one of the trickiest to handle. In the 2013 book, “Business Analysis & Leadership: Influencing Change”, Sarah Coleman notes:

“The typical organizational chart illustrates the legitimate authority and delegated power[...] However, it won’t reveal much about which other individuals or groups hold particular power or influence, who are thought leaders or who help shape attitudes and beliefs within the organization (Coleman in Pullan & Archer (eds), 2013).”

It may sometimes feel as though there are two organizational power structures, the official structure, and the real one. This is illustrated by the diagram below:

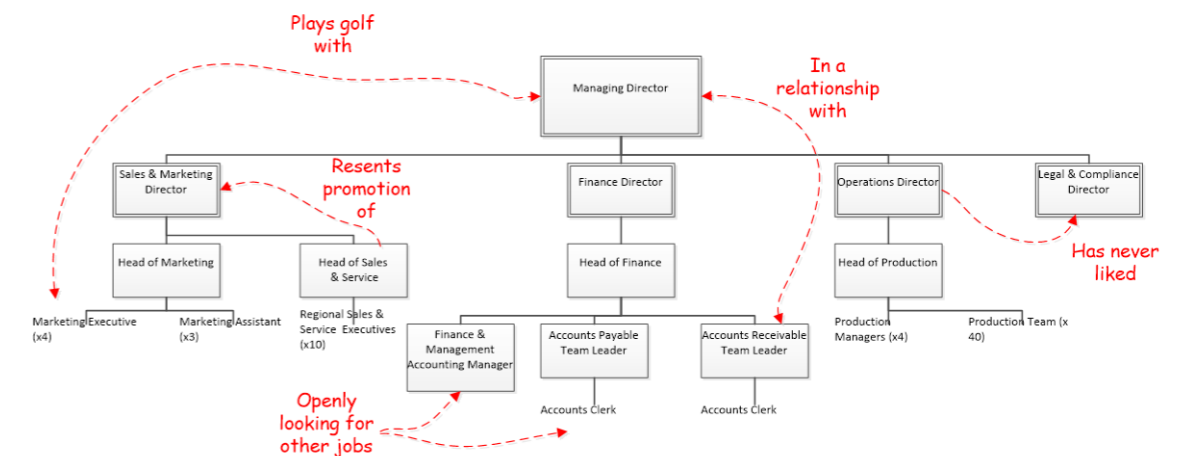


Figure 2: A wide range of relationships and issues transcend the ‘official’ power structure

Power and politics can manifest themselves in ways that directly affect how processes operate. Certain middle managers may insist on particular inspection or approval steps taking place, even though they are no longer required and are causing delays. The root of their objection may be a reluctance to relinquish the perceived power that inspecting or approving activities gives them. We may, alternatively find that there are certain teams and departments that typically agree with each other, and others that seem to constantly disagree on just about every issue. This might have been caused by some long forgotten historical issue, which has left a reluctance to openly collaborate in its wake.

Whilst our work as analysts would be easier if power-related and political issues did not exist, we would be foolhardy to ignore them. It is important that we map out not only the formal stakeholder landscape, but also consider alliances, politics and informal networks. It is important that we get to know which stakeholders get along, and enough of the historical context to understand why some stakeholder disagreements and clashes exist.

Knowing the wider context will help us uncover and understand any political root causes that may be affecting the operation of activities or processes. It will also enable us to collaborate and co-create solutions that achieve the desired outcome whilst also meeting the broader needs of individual (high-influence) stakeholders.

Summary & Conclusion

Process issues have a wide range of causes, and it is important that we look beyond the obvious factors. Investigating and understanding how the process is managed can yield significant insight, and may help us get closer to root causes of any concerns. Management of process is a broad topic encompassing many areas, but it is particularly useful to consider how the process is measured, whether the organization is supportive, whether communication is effective (both internally and externally), and whether power and politics are a factor in causing the issue. These are tricky issues to address, but by highlighting them – and highlighting them early – we avoid inadvertently investing time into developing and delivering solutions that will not solve the ultimate root cause of any problem that is being reported.

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Further Reading

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Adrian Reed is a Consulting Lead Business Analyst who is passionate about the analysis profession. He is Principal Consultant and Director at Blackmetric Business Solutions (www.blackmetric.co.uk), where he provides business analysis consultancy and training solutions to a range of clients in varying industries. He is also a director of the UK chapter of the International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA). Adrian is a true advocate of the analysis profession, and is constantly looking for ways of promoting the value that good analysis can bring.

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