Process is Easy, Change is Hard

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Abstract. Process is all around us. We follow processes in just about everything we do, from getting dressed in the morning to loading the dishwasher after a meal to walking the dog. Processes provide essential structure in life and in the workplace. Organizations rely on processes to get work done. However, organizations are always looking for ways to improve processes. This issue of "Crosstalk" covers a number of process improvement methodologies that organizations can use. All of these methods have their merits, but they have also experienced both success and struggle over the years. Why is it that process improvement methods sound so simple and straightforward but usually prove difficult to implement? The answer is simple — improvement methods all involve something very difficult: change. Choosing the process methodology is the easy part; managing the change and the resistance that comes with it makes it difficult.

Organizations may encourage change, but people typically don't like it. At face value, change is disruptive. Before people will embrace change, they need to understand the reasons behind it and how the change will benefit them. Resistance to change is inevitable, but organizations can manage change to help make desired improvements easier to achieve. As if organizational change isn't hard enough, a new generation is entering the workforce with different attitudes and views. The introduction of a new generation with a different point of view affects the dynamics of change. This article will examine processes, process improvement methods and change. How an organization manages change will determine how successful any process improvement effort will be.

The Easy Part: Process and Process Methodologies

What is a process? Simply put, a process is a series of related steps one follows to achieve a desired result. That end result could be providing a service, producing a product, or reaching an objective. Every organization follows processes, even if they don't realize it. Processes tend to arise naturally in an organization. When the people in an organization first try to do something, they realize that certain things must be done to accomplish the desired end result. As time goes on, these things and the sequence in which they are performed become habit or routine. People accept that certain things need to be done every time. Hence, a process is born. It may not be formally written down. It may not be followed exactly the same way each time. But it's there, and people accept it as the way things are done.

After people follow a process for a while, the organization takes notice. The organization may decide that things could be done better for any of a number of reasons. Organizations may want to do things faster, cheaper or with better results. When that happens, they start to look outside the organization for ways to improve their processes. Suddenly, organizations face a number of methodologies to choose from, including Lean Six Sigma, Agile, International Standards Organization (ISO) standards, Total Quality Management (TQM), and the Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI), among others.

Which one should an organization choose? Lean sounds good. Who wants a fat, bloated process? Six Sigma sounds scientific. It has a Greek word in it, after all. The ancient Greeks were pretty smart. Agile sounds good too. Who wouldn't want to be quick and agile? Slow and plodding doesn't sound nearly as good. ISO is international. That must be good, right? TQM must mean that the organization is in control of something because it is "managing" total quality, not just partial quality, but "total quality." The CMMI sounds pretty academic. It may not sound as riveting or catchy as some of the others, but an organization should want to be a mature grown-up about things. Mature capability sounds pretty good too. After all, who wants to be immature and incapable? It can come with a maturity rating too. That's even better — ratings look great on marketing brochures and corporate reports.

Next comes research into what all of these methods involve. When the organization reads the testimonials and thinks they understand a little about some of the methods, in come the consultants. When management meets the consultants, the conversation goes something like this:

Management: "We want to improve our processes."
Consultant: "Great! My methodology and I can help."
Management: "Which processes should I improve?"
Consultant: "Well, your processes."
Management: "I know, but which ones?"
Consultant: "The ones that are most important to you."
Management: "Umm … Which ones should those be?"

From there, the conversation moves on to a general discussion of process and organizational goals and needs. At some point, the consultant describes his or her methodology and how it can help. Management decides which processes need focused effort. When agreement is reached on the methodology and target processes, most process improvement efforts follow the same basic steps:

–Document the current process.
–Identify the desired improvements.
–Involve the affected people.
–Apply the selected improvement methodology.
–Deal with resistance to change.

The Hard Part: Managing Organizational Change

Regardless of methodology, improving processes is pretty simple, easy and straightforward up until changes to the process are actually proposed or made. How organizations manage the changes — and resistance to them — determines whether or not changes are successful. If change is managed well, improvement happens and the organization moves forward. If change is not managed well, the organization often moves on to the next "improvement du jour" and the cycle starts over again.

Resistance comes in many forms. Often, the first resistance comes from the fact that the process is how things have always been done. People are comfortable with it and know what to expect. Change involves uncertainty. People do not like uncertainty.

The resulting resistance can come in many forms:

– Attacking the proposal.
– False acceptance of the proposal.
– Avoidance of the new process.
– Constantly asking questions and acting confused about the new process.
– Never having time to commit to the improvement process.
– Agreeing with everything right up until the time to implement that change, and then finding a variety of questions and concerns. [1]

It's easy for people to understand ideas like providing better service to customers, building a better product, understanding requirements before beginning work, planning the work so you know what to expect, and managing against a plan to evaluate progress. However, as soon they hear that they need to change the way they do things, process improvement becomes hard.

Resistance tests an organization's commitment to improvement and change. For improvement efforts to be successful, organizations must be able to clearly state the reasons for change in a way that is meaningful to the people in the organization. No matter how cool they sound, statements like, "We want to be a world-class provider of choice," mean absolutely nothing to the people in the organization. The improvement efforts must be shown to support the work of the organization. The organization's mission will always win over process improvement efforts, and it should. Getting the work done is paramount. However, the improvement efforts must support getting the work done, or the organization is pursuing the wrong improvements.

Successful improvement efforts need more than a statement of what needs to be improved and why. Improvement requires resources and a plan. Management cannot simply supply resources and step back, waiting to hear when things are better. Management must show commitment to the change. The improvement efforts must be supported and reinforced in order to be successful. Peer pressure can be a great tool for management to use. Reinforcement can come from rewarding those that implement the change and applying pressure on those that do not. Management cannot afford to be vague about their support for process improvements.

Resources for process improvements are critical to successful change. These resources include the people needed to support and manage the change. Supporting infrastructure also enables improvement and includes the following:

– A process improvement plan.
– Documented processes.
– Organizational standards for processes, products and work environments.
– Organizational repositories for processes, measurements and lessons learned.

In order for a change to be successful, the entire workforce must be engaged. Different approaches work for different people. For example, as organizations integrate a new generation into the workplace, communication becomes a greater concern. The new generation looks at the world differently. They are used to always being connected. To them, old communication methods are just that — old and slow. Organizations must use a variety of tools to get the word out and to reinforce the need for improvement and change.

As the new generation finds its place and value in the workforce, longtime employees need to feel that they are not losing their value. Change may be appealing to the new generation, but they will also appreciate the support provided by an established process infrastructure. Long-term employees may feel that change threatens them, but an organization should draw on these employees' knowledge to help establish an infrastructure for the new employees to follow. Both old and new employees need to feel ownership of the processes and the associated improvement efforts. The entire workforce must be able to see that the change is organized and necessary. If they see things as disorganized or unnecessary, resistance will increase.

Conclusion

Organizations will find that the most difficult aspect of process improvement is truly the change associated with it, regardless of the improvement methodology chosen. Organizations should consider more than one methodology to find a good fit. Different improvement methodologies complement one another and can be used in combination. Something like the CMMI can provide an overall structure by providing a menu of process areas to focus improvement efforts, while Lean Six Sigma and Agile can help to streamline processes and remove wasteful activities in those process areas.

Once an organization decides which approach it will follow for process improvement, the focus needs to change from process methodology to managing organizational change. Choosing the process methodology is the easy part, but managing the change and the resistance that comes with it is more difficult. Organizations must set relatable improvement goals, plan their improvement like a project, provide resources, involve the entire workforce, manage the improvement project, reinforce desired behavior, and celebrate success. Paying attention to those details will help make change easier.

NOTES

1. For a more complete look at resistance and how to deal with it, see "Flawless Consulting" by Peter Bloch, 3rd edition, c. March 2011, Pfeiffer and Company, San Diego, Calif.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Kimmerly worked for 25 years for the different incarnations of the United States Marine Corps Technology Services Organization (USMC TSO). He spent the last 16 years as the SEPG Lead before he retired in July 2011. Kimmerly is a certified CMMI High Maturity Lead Appraiser and instructor for the CMMI for Development and the CMMI for Acquisition. He works as an independent contractor with the CMMI Institute teaching and observing candidate lead appraisers and instructors. He is also a member of the editorial board for "Crosstalk" magazine. He contributed several articles on process improvement to "Crosstalk." The articles cover topics including organizational change, management's role in process improvement, acquisition, and high maturity concepts. Since retiring from government service, Kimmerly continues to work with clients in both the government and private industry as part of Double Play Process Diagnostics, Inc.

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