

Process Improvement: Critical Success Factors

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At the simplest level, process improvement initiatives seek four primary outcomes within the context of good customer service and organizational efficiency and effectiveness. These outcomes are: to reduce processing timelines; increase service predictability and consistency through clarity of roles and responsibilities; eliminate duplicate and redundant processing steps; and meet quality requirements.

At this point, simplicity disappears. The complexities inherent in changing behaviours associated with process improvement and implementation become apparent. This is the business of change management and transition. This is both an art and a science. “Science” addresses the mechanistic portions of change management (eg. IT selection, implementation schedules). The “art” of change is in the human dimension. It is a transition – a willingness to change behaviour that was once familiar.

Several critical success factors repeatedly emerge as integral to moving a project towards successful and optimal outcomes. The list is not exhaustive, nor is ranking implied. Priority varies by project and organization.

Clear Project Purpose

A clear project purpose must be linked to corporate strategic directions, vision and values. Debate over differing philosophical and organization direction perspectives; conflicting interests related to issues; pursuit of theoretical constructs versus day-to-day practicalities; and varying perspectives on the appropriateness and enforceability of regulatory solutions can be endless in the absence of a guiding strategic direction. It is helpful to:

- provide a clear statement of the project’s purpose and a vision of desired outcomes;
- reinforce the principle that project outcomes are to be congruent with corporate directional plans and the behavioural guidelines provided by the organization's values; and
- refer to corporate and departmental plans and values as standards against which potential solutions can be tested.

Clear Project Scope

A clear scope clause and/or project charter can substantially enhance project outcomes and ease project completion. The following strategies will help meet this goal.

- Clearly articulate a shared understanding of “what is within” and “what is outside” the projects’ scope. Unclear scope clauses invariably lead to unexpressed, yet assumed deliverables, or unmet performance expectations. Vocal disappointment and scope creep can result with accompanying cost and time over-runs.

- Establish performance measures, milestones, timelines, quality standards, and outcomes to be delivered with stakeholders. Early stakeholder consensus can help avoid misunderstandings during the term of the project.
- Require integration across functional disciplines and specialized services where appropriate. It is rare to find standalone processes not linked to other staff and departments; interdependence is a given in customer service delivery. The definition of roles, responsibilities, required authorities and accountabilities will, in turn, be a straightforward process.

Energy! Direction! Action!

There are three essential components to optimal goal achievement. Having a healthy dose of all three ensures success.

Energy – the unflagging and relentless drive and commitment to achieve a goal; persistence and perseverance throughout a project.

Direction – a well articulated vision of the possible; a stretch within reach; a compelling view of the future; a dream made tangible with deadlines.

Action – an action-orientation with a sense of urgency; application of project management practices with defined roles, responsibilities and timelines; routine progress reporting.

Project Sponsors and Managers: Know Thyself

Essentially, there are primary and secondary management styles. Primary styles are used under normal circumstances. Secondary styles surface when stressed. Secondary styles can help or hinder project outcomes. Answer the following questions to identify your primary and secondary personality styles:

- How far am I willing to go with this project generally, and with known difficult issues?
- What is my tolerance level for change and resultant potential stress?
- How do I react to uncertainty and the risk of personal censure and, in turn, towards project staff?
- Do I prefer a “Damn the torpedoes and go straight ahead” process methodology, or a pace of change that causes minimal physical or emotional sensation? Somewhere in-between?

This information can be used to guide development of project phasing, establish project scope, and guide the process methodology. Sensitive and complex projects have difficult moments. Staff need to know that project sponsors and managers will support them during difficult times. Project sponsors and managers achieve the best results when operating within the effective range of their management styles.

Respect the Past: People and Processes

Eagerness to cast off frustrations with existing processes and capture anticipated benefits of redesigned processes should be tempered with respect for past processes, bearing in mind the following factors.

- The status quo process was once the latest improvement, and high hopes were held for resolution of issues of its day.
- Several staff who built or are maintaining the current process, often with heroic efforts, remain as employees. Capture their knowledge and note that they often look forward to making improvements.
- No one criticizes the Wright brothers for inventing an airplane without windows! Process and technological improvement, no matter how spectacular, is part of an endless incremental continuum.
- Celebrate the ending that simultaneously signals a beginning. Recognize the contributions of the past within the continuity of ongoing change. Recognize that today's leading edge process will become tomorrow's historical amusement.
- Perspective is helpful. Honouring past contributions encourages a culture respectful of staff efforts and initiatives. A culture of continuous process improvement and continuous learning is encouraged.

Process Methodology: Two Observations

Much of what has been outlined above refers to a process methodology involving substantial facilitation and participation. Stakeholder participation in identifying issues, interests and root causes of key issues, as well as participation in developing guiding principles for process redesign, enables successful and supported change. Participation can facilitate the transformation of department-centric thinking into process-centric teamwork.

During the process of identifying issues, avoid over-reliance on emotionally charged stories of problems of horrific proportions. It is common to hear problems related with great passion, sounding as if they just happened and were a common occurrence. On questioning, many of these incidents happened only once – years ago. Such incidents are “outliers” events far beyond frequent occurrence and outside the need to address in process redesign. Instead, seek factual information and analyze to identify the typically small number of major issues to be addressed during redesign.

Facts ground us, draw us back to reality, temper emotional charge and keep us focused. It is impossible to control every eventuality. Managers will recall examples of regulation initiatives spurred on by a single unusual and unpleasant event. Facts cause reflection and analysis; emotions are tempered. The perspective achieved improves process design.

Replace Habits Quickly

Habits are the set of behaviours with which we have become so familiar that the need to think about task completion is minimal. Many tasks are completed as if we live on automatic pilot.

Change challenges us to let go of habitual behaviour, and to think through how tasks might be completed. There are two issues with letting go: loss of the familiar; and the concurrent need to concentrate on the task at hand (i.e. develop a new habit). To reduce the stress and sense of disorientation that replacing habits creates, try the following.

- Involve staff in developing new processes (i.e. new habits); task requirements made of their own design are more easily accepted.
- Provide staff with copies of redesigned process maps. A visual representation of steps and responsibilities does wonders with reorientation.
- Replace “old” habits with “new” habits as soon as possible. Build the momentum for change with incremental and grouped process changes.

Avoid Avoidance

It is a normal first response to want to avoid unpleasant and persistently difficult or sensitive issues. Unfortunately, avoiding these types of issues often leads to sub-optimal process improvement. Some common areas of avoidance include the following.

- Assumed longstanding council “policy” or preferences can limit addressing legitimate issues for process improvement. Some assumptions extend over many council terms and may no longer be valid. Checking assumptions with council can often be accomplished within the context of sound judgment and prudent timing.
- At times, external customers are perceived as being outside process improvement initiatives. Seeking both internal and external customer (eg. planning and development) input on issues and solutions can yield improved processes. Collaboration makes mutual understanding and commitment possible.
- Non-constructive, excessive negative energy can sometimes be generated by a few staff. If unchecked, excessive negative energy is corrosive to process improvement and to project team members. Nip it in the bud! Excessive negative energy is power-based and is not the usual staff frustration inherent in learning new processes. Address valid concerns and repeat the commitment to change.

Like many of life’s paradoxes, the best value for time and money invested in process improvement can lie in addressing unpleasant, yet commonly known issues. Some issues are the organizational equivalent of family secrets; the untouchable topics. When these topics (i.e. often interpersonal issues) remain unaddressed, managers and staff modify processing steps to work around or avoid the problem. Inefficiency results and resentment builds until the issues are addressed. They do not go away.

Conclusion

Process improvement is one element of the continual change process inherent in life - personal, societal and organizational. Solid planning and organization, ample involvement of those affected by change, and an openness to build collaborative solutions works towards optimal success. Change provides an exciting opportunity for growth, while simultaneously contributing to organizational success. Capturing the spirit of change enables optimal contribution.

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