

Process Improvement Alan Ramias

Sole Survivor: How to be Successful as a One-Person BPM Shop

For someone new to BPM who attends a face-to-face event such as a BBC Conference, the experience might be inspiring but also a little daunting. What you often hear are dazzling success stories from people working at companies where BPM has been strongly embraced, where process management infrastructure and practices are in place, where process improvement efforts are yielding great returns, where there are dedicated COE staffs of process experts modeling processes and managing process documentation systems, helping to monitor process performance and collect results data, educating executives and employees on the virtues of BPM, running improvement teams...

But often the reality—if you happen to be a BPM practitioner at a company which is new to the concept—is that you are largely on your own. Even if you were brought in from elsewhere because you have a lot of BPM experience, getting traction in a new setting is likely to be highly challenging. And I've met a good number of attendees at BPM conferences who have no prior BPM experience; they got transferred or promoted to this role which is brand-new to the company, thus the challenges are that much greater.

So aside from getting educated, what are some of the things you can do to become established, get some results, to gain a credible reputation in your organization for being knowledgeable, practical and dedicated? That's what this Column—the first in a series about "the sole survivor"—is about: to suggest things you can do early in the game to get somewhere with BPM when there is only you (at least at first). This series will not be so much about tools and methods but about tactics for early success. I will be drawing on my own past experience as a sole survivor myself in a couple of organizations—not as an external consultant but as an internal staffer.

The rest of this Column is devoted to the first subject vital to the sole survivor: what do you do first?

What to Do First as a Sole Survivor

Sometimes when you're starting out, the first steps in your path have already been laid out for you. Someone has asked for process improvement, or perhaps the identified need is to get some process metrics in place. If you have a specific assignment when you first come on board, then by all means, go do it and make your work the showcase from which you can build the rest of your success.

But for a lot of newly arrived (or newly appointed) BPM practitioners, the organization is relying on *you* to tell *them* what to do. In such a case, what option is

best? Do you try to start up a process management team, or identify all the possible processes, or concentrate on process modeling, or start collecting performance data, or train up employees on BPM, or (heaven help you) install some BPM software? To some extent, you may still be guided by the expectations of key people (the ones who hired you or placed you in the position), the goals of senior management, the interests of potential sponsors, the organization’s deficiencies that you believe BPM can help address.

But if the choice is largely up to you, here’s your best bet: Conduct a process improvement project (PIP). Why? Because of all the choices open to you, a PIP will produce the fastest, most concrete proof that there is something very advantageous to this process stuff.

The thing is, the notion of “business processes” can sound awfully academic to many business people who just want stuff to get done. If approached with too much theory and high-minded notions, BPM comes off as just another intellectualism that has little to do with the realities of business. And even though so many books and articles about BPM have infiltrated the workplace over the past few decades that just about everyone in every company has some familiarity with the ideas and lingo, skepticism abounds.

But a PIP can turn that skepticism off, especially a PIP that for example cuts cycle time in half or reduces inventories by thousands of dollars, or increases sales and brings in new customers. A PIP can produce *results*, bottom-line payoff for the effort. And you can lead a single PIP yourself—you don’t need an army of consultants or an internal staff, although you do need an internal team to lead through the improvement effort.

Then once you have that initial success, you sell it relentlessly—everywhere, to anyone who will listen, again and again—to show what BPM produced. You become a shameless salesman for improvement, and sooner or later you’ll have another opportunity, and then another...

A Decision about Methodology

So what do you need to pull off this initial success? To run a process improvement project, you’ll need an improvement methodology. And once you have chosen a methodology you’ll need to get trained in it. Here are some of the best-known (and best) options, with a few of my own (possibly controversial) observations on their relative positives and negatives:

Methodology	Focus	Advantages	Drawbacks
Lean	Streamlining of processes by eliminating waste and delay Use of value stream mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to understand and easy to teach • Applicable to any business • Installs an improvement culture along with the method and tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of defects and causes tends to be superficial • Doesn’t overtly address change management • Doesn’t overtly address process management
Six Sigma	Removal of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple levels of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be overkill for

	variation and product/process defects Heavy use of statistical analysis	skills training available <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used to conduct “deep” analysis of root causes and produce lasting improvements • Installs a cadre of people with roles in Six Sigma projects 	organizations that don’t need heavy statistical data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many organizations have trained people who never use their skills • Projects often have narrow focus • Doesn’t overtly address change management • Doesn’t completely address process management (does produce the data and tools to track process performance)
Lean Six Sigma	Combines best of Lean and Six Sigma tools and steps into a single methodology	Overcomes Lean’s weakness in analysis; overcomes Six Sigma’s weakness in simple tools	Still doesn’t address change management or fully address process management
Rummler Methodology ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World’s first end-to-end process improvement methodology, was the origination of Six Sigma • Focuses on streamlining of processes by eliminating “disconnects” inside and outside the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy emphasis on scoping and front-end project definition • Integrates change management • Integrates management system redesign with process redesign • Integrates process management • Integrates enabling technology change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light on analysis, relying mostly on design team for identification of disconnects • Huge number of tools can be overwhelming • Not as well known today as Lean Six Sigma so harder to find and to sell

Your other option is to cobble together your own methodology. It certainly can be done. By drawing from the many books and articles available, you can create your own rendition of an improvement approach by borrowing the best ideas you can find and maybe inventing some of your own. But a couple things to be careful of:

- Not everything is free. Respect the copyright ownership of others. (Forgive my sanctimony, but you’ll appreciate that if you one day become an author yourself.)

¹ Full disclosure: I am a partner at Performance Design Lab, a co-owner of the Rummler Process Methodology (RPM) and a past partner in The Rummler-Brache Group.

- Homegrown methodologies are vulnerable to incoherence. If a lot of different ideas and tools are thrown together without a visible structure and sequence, the result can be a mystifying jumble that others won't understand or adopt.

The best structure for developing a methodology is the classic "swimlane" process map, which contains roles, steps, phases, tools, documents and anything else pertinent to the methodology. If you can render your methodology in such a format, you are well on the way to having an approach that will work.

Next time, let's talk about what constitutes a good first project. Because aside from a methodology, you also need an opportunity—a process to work your magic on. Organizations have all kinds of processes, so where do you look and how do you choose?

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Alan Ramias is a Partner of the Performance Design Lab (PDL). He has had twenty-five years of experience in performance improvement and organization effectiveness. Alan was employed by Motorola for ten years as an internal consultant on organizational performance. As a member of the team that founded Motorola University, he was the first person to introduce Geary Rummler's pioneering concepts in process improvement and management to business units within Motorola. Alan advocated and led several of the first groundbreaking projects in process improvement that evolved to the invention of six sigma and Motorola's winning of the first Malcolm Baldrige Award in 1988. Alan was also involved in major restructuring projects at Motorola, and in job design work, compensation planning, workplace literacy, and educational program development. After joining The Rummler-Brache Group in 1991, Alan led major successful performance improvement engagements within Fortune 500 companies. His experience spanned several industries and the full spectrum of corporate functions and processes, such as strategic planning, manufacturing, product development, financial management, and supply chain. Major clients included Shell, Hewlett-Packard, 3M, Citibank, Motorola, Steelcase, Citgo, Hermann Miller, Louisiana-Pacific, and Bank One. After leading many high-profile projects, he became a partner and Managing Director of Consulting Services at RBG. He led development of much of RBG's products and services, and was responsible for selecting, training and mentoring RBG's consultant teams. Upon leaving RBG, Alan founded his own consulting company, where he continued to practice in the field of performance consulting. He was also involved in several organizational

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