



Practical Process

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What If 'Top Down' Isn't Possible?

There can be no doubt that positioning Business Process Management as an organization's management philosophy with the full and active support of the senior executive team is the preferred path. Achieving the fabled executive buy-in is a huge advantage. The more senior and more committed the support, the easier it will be to make lasting change. Appropriate resources will be available. Deep understanding at the executive level will mean that strategic impetus will support the BPM message. Management attention on process will be not only encouraged, but mandated.

By Business Process Management (BPM) I do not mean just the automation of processes. BPM is not software. I mean the management philosophy of process-based management. Enterprises adopting BPM have a well understood process architecture that shows how value is delivered to customers and other stakeholders, they set measurable targets for process performance, create effective mechanisms for reacting to those measures and continually seek to improve that performance. All processes can be improved. Some might be automated.

If the 'BPM genie' appeared, which would you choose: start bottom up, or middle out, with the passionate support of a business unit manager or top down with the CEO as your champion? No brainer. Choose the CEO, she'll be able to make things happen. The manager will be a useful team member but he is unlikely to be able to change the corporate mindset and entrenched practice.

But what if you can't get the CEO's support up front? This is the common story for most process practitioners seeking to promote the enterprise-wide process view. Is 'top down' the only way?

Jo Smith is a middle manager in a large organization. She runs a significant business unit and is well respected for her organizational and management abilities. Recently she has read some articles on process management and the concepts appeal to her. Jo and two of her team have attended a BPM conference and an in-depth training course. So they are fired up and ready to go. An immediate problem is that she keeps hearing people say that "*you must have senior executive support if BPM is to succeed*" and her CEO thinks that BPM is "*an old and discredited bit of nonsense invented by academics who haven't got a clue and promoted by consultants who can't get a real job*". Although she will be there one day, Jo is not a member of the senior executive team and can't start a genuinely enterprise-wide BPM initiative on her own authority. If she needs to have the CEO as the BPM champion then she has a lot of work to do and, it seems, the odd miracle to perform. She's a good operator and may well be able to pull this off but it will take a lot of time and effort. It might even harm her promotion chances if she gets too far on the wrong side of the CEO. Perhaps she should forget BPM and move on to something else that has executive support?

Is it really true that you must make process management changes from the top down? Do you

really have to start from the very top? Are we really saying to all the Jo Smiths that the first task is to evangelize the executive floor before any change towards process thinking can take place?

This is the “Executive Support Conundrum”. There’s no doubt that Jo Smith would find it much easier to develop a process-based management mindset throughout the organization if she had the support of the CEO. However, to get the support of the CEO and others she’ll need to demonstrate the business benefits of a BPM approach. But she can’t do that on an enterprise-wide basis without the support of the CEO. She can use case studies from other organizations but they reflect other industries, operational environments and market conditions. She needs CEO support but can’t get that without demonstration projects that can’t be started without CEO support. Not much future in that unproductive loop!

In those organizations where the process initiative is not initially coming from the top, and in my experience that’s most of them, those who are trying to raise process awareness have to use whatever leverage they can find.

Where are the people and places in the organization where the general concepts of process-based management seem to have some resonance? Who are the people who express some interest in learning more about how process thinking can help with critical business issues? Where are the opportunities to showcase the power of process thinking? What are the current problems that could be improved by taking a process view? Can we define current problem areas where we can enlist the right authority to effect change?

Starting out in this way means that there will, at least in the early stages, be more emphasis on process improvement (PI) than process management (PM).

Process improvement projects focus on particular process problems, more or less in isolation. Processes are analyzed and redesigned within a project framework and with no particular commitment to an ongoing process view of management. Significant (and ongoing?) improvements can be made in terms of customer service and operational efficiency. Indeed one of the things that sometimes makes process management hard to achieve is that process improvement can be so successful in the short term.

Process management is not a project. It is a management mindset, a philosophy that results in process-based management. PM delivers a premium benefit by integrating the PI projects and providing an overall context where the dominant view of the organization is process-centric. Of course a process-centric organization is ultimately and resolutely focused on delivering value to customers. The “process view” is just a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Starting with a process management commitment and initiating process improvement projects in that context, i.e. top down, is undoubtedly the preferred pathway. Where that is not possible, start with process improvement projects and then ‘connect the dots’ to effect process management. Although a longer and probably more arduous journey, this PI2PM pathway can be very effective.

To make that transition to higher levels of BPM maturity requires several key components. One that is often missed is the simple task of recording the successes. In many cases when you ask people who have been doing good process improvement work to describe the successes they have had over the last year or two, they get very vague. It’s not that success didn’t happen, but there was no specific record of the success story made. Write it up every time. Build a portfolio of success stories. To sell the process view benefits you need the marketing collateral.

Of course, not having senior executive involvement is not all bad. The higher you go, the higher the expectations and pressures to succeed. If you are still learning yourself and feeling your way through the many pathways to process, you may *not* want the support of, and consequent scrutiny from, the executive floor. In reality we are unlikely to refuse executive support, so we better think through how to manage and shape expectations.

So what should Jo Smith do? A broad plan for her PI2PM pathway should include the seven elements described below. In initial implementation they often form a chronological sequence. However, each of the elements persists and it is in their simultaneous achievement and maintenance that true process-centric culture is found.

1. Fertile Grounds

Find and maintain the fertile ground, the people and places where the process message creates interest. In these areas initiate process improvement projects that will have significant impact. At the same time initiate a series of appropriate process management education activities.

2. Enterprise Process Architecture

Create a high level process panorama of the complete organization to show the core processes and the important management and supporting processes. This will provide a context and reference model for all future process work.

3. Measure & Manage

Measuring process performance is fundamental. Whatever else we are doing, if we are not doing effective process performance measurement, and responding to those measurements, then we certainly aren't doing process management, and how would we know if we are doing process improvement? Without agreed process measures (and measurement methods), the concepts of BPM are meaningless.

4. Maintain The Knowledge

Collect and collate the process analysis work being done in the process improvement projects to form a developing process repository and knowledge base. Inculcate clear quality goals, implementing standards and review mechanisms for all process analysis and modeling work. Identify appropriate tools and techniques for process description and analysis. Create a 'process lexicon' to give a shared language for process discussions

5. Deliver Benefits

Success breeds success. Create a 'process improvement scorecard', mechanisms to track and report the quantitative and qualitative benefits delivered. Delivering practical benefits can only come from the development of process understanding and performance reporting that create pragmatic and positive impacts in day-to-day business operations.

6. Communicate, Communicate

Celebrate, communicate and record the successes. Make this material available to the whole organization. These are priceless opportunities for selling and re-selling the process message.

7. Build & Sustain Maturity

Keep focused on the need to move from PI to PM. Introducing process performance attributes to personal performance assessments will be an important marker of growing BPM maturity. Use all of the PI2PM elements above to make the case for 'connecting the dots' to establish, fund and nurture process-based management.

In Summary

Will a mature BPM mindset develop out of this? There are no guarantees, but if all Jo Smith ever does is run process improvement projects that save a few million each year and improve the

customer experience, that's a great way to fail. Success will mean all of that plus the creation of a process and customer-centric organization focused on the optimization of value delivery to all stakeholders.

We can say that top-down is not the only way to start the BPM journey. Many organizations start bottom-up or middle-out. We may not have to start top-down, but it is the only way to finish.

I'd love to hear your opinions. Let's continue the discussion at the BPTrends Discussion LinkedIn group or you can contact me at r.tregear@leonardo.com.au.

BPTrends LinkedIn Discussion Group

We recently created a BPTrends Discussion Group on LinkedIn to allow our members, readers and friends to freely exchange ideas on a wide variety of BPM related topics. We encourage you to initiate a new discussion on this publication or on other BPM related topics of interest to you, or to contribute to existing discussions. Go to LinkedIn and join the [BPTrends Discussion Group](#).