

## Process Pragmatics

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At numerous seminars and conferences, the question is often raised, “How can my company become a Process Organization?” The asker is typically an intense, dedicated, mid-level manager from a staff function, who is balancing a strong personal commitment to Process and a deep frustration with his organization’s glacial progress towards process-centricity.

It’s a fine question. It’s a well-intentioned question. It’s sincere too. But it’s the wrong question. And, it focuses on the wrong issue as well. In fact, it is phrased in a potentially dangerous and counter-productive way.

The really important issue is not the nature of an organizational model, but the quality of the organization’s performance. To paraphrase an old movie cliché, “We don’t need no stinkin’ process organization.” What we do need is an organization full of high performing processes. We need a company where our processes create high value and immense profits, operate at low costs, and generate constant customer delight. We need an unrelenting focus on performance. In the world of process, it is always the outcomes that matter. Success stems from mastering the language (and, of course, achievement) of results.

When we, or anyone, become so enchanted with our elegant process ideology that PROCESS becomes the end instead of the means, we risk losing our credibility.

Instead of asking, “How do we become a process organization?,” the right question is “How do we ensure that our processes become high performing?” And, strangely enough, that is how the issue of process management does become relevant.

Why? Because in order to optimize our processes, we need to create governance mechanisms that allow us to deal with processes in their entirety, align executive responsibility with process results, and focus process improvements on the opportunities with the greatest leverage. Process management, with its complement of process owners, process councils, decision rights, and improvement portfolios is the critical enabler of improving process performance. That’s why we need process organizations, not the other way around.

Therefore the essential syllogism is:

**Process Improvement Requires and Catalyzes Process Management  
and  
Process Management Enables and Supports Process Improvement**

Let’s explore how this looks in action. Suppose you are charged with leading an enterprise supply chain improvement project. What do you immediately discover? You find that the supply chain is fragmented from here to eternity, and includes parts of 117 different organizational units, each with their own measures, priorities, and language. No way are they going to let you mess with their precious logistics. You also discover that there are really 19 different software systems—many undeclared operating across the company—and 392 other competing supply



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chain improvement projects as well. How can you possibly succeed in this environment? You can't, unless you have, or anoint, a powerful process owner who can ensure the right level of enterprise optimization and who can ensure compliance from the affected units. Process improvement requires process management, which enables improvement, which induces governance. It's a virtual cycle.

So, when we lead with a focus on process organizations, what we communicate, inadvertently or otherwise, is an academic interest in the idea of process. It's a terrific way to sound irrelevant and ideological. On the other hand, if we focus, with a laser-like intensity, on results and process performance, we will be on the right track to achieve both.

