Practical Process

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From many personal experiences, positive and negative, of encouraging organizations and their teams and people with the idea of process-based management, I offer some thoughts in this Column about one very important aspect – it's a mind game, not tool time.

The achievement of effective, sustained process-based management is 90% mindset and 10% toolset. High levels of BPM maturity can only be achieved and maintained if the correct conceptual framework is in play.

Too often we are focused on the 10%, at the expense of the 90%. The tools and techniques are critically important, but they are not the main game. Having the right IT and other tools is a necessary, but nowhere near sufficient, condition for success.

Making the idea of BPM resonate within an organization requires deep engagement with the key challenges of contemporary management. If you don't 'think process', you won't 'do process'. The likelihood that organizations, teams or individuals will adopt process-centric approaches to management depends on what they think will happen if they do.

Process-based management must give positive support to the achievement of organizational objectives if it is to have any value. Success is not measured in the number of models drawn, the cleverness of the process architecture, the number of process measures, the documentation of methodologies, or the sophistication of the automation. Success can only be claimed if organizational performance has been improved, and demonstrably so, as a result of taking a process view.

People will only buy-in to the idea of BPM if they can see that it is likely to solve some clear and present difficulty in a pragmatic, cost-effective, and sustainable way. When pitching the idea of BPM, we need to be thinking about As Is / To Be changes, not in processes, but in mindsets.

About now you might be tempted to suggest "Well, D'oh. Of course! That's obvious". Well, we might assert that it should be like that, but the evidence says that we have a long way to go.

In the BPTrends report discussing the survey of BPM trends in 2012[1], it is reported that only 31% of respondents said that "their executives regarded BPM as a major strategic commitment." Another disturbing survey result says that in 59% of cases, managers were never, or only occasionally, "trained to analyze, design, and manage business processes"[2]. Even more worrying

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[1] Wolf, Celia and Paul Harmon. "The State of Business Process Management 2012", p. 6. Accessed March 22, 2013.
http://www.bptrends.com/members_surveys/deliver.cfm?report_id=1006&target=2012-_BPT SURVEY-3-12-12-CW-PH.pdf&return=surveys_landing.cfm

[2] Ibid., p 20.

is the analysis showing that 53% of respondents said their managers never, or only occasionally, "use performance data to manage their processes"[3]. There's another way of doing that?

This suggests that we are a long way from having an effective process mindset in many organizations.

As always, to be sure we are talking about the same thing, I summarize my understanding of the BPM management philosophy as follows:

> *Business processes are the collections of cross-functional activities that deliver value to an organization's external customers and other stakeholders. They are the only way that any organization can deliver such value. Individual organizational functional areas cannot, by themselves, deliver value to external customers. It follows that an organization executes its strategic intent via its business processes. Business processes are the conduits through which value is exchanged between customers and the organization. Therefore, business processes need to be thoughtfully managed and continuously improved to maintain an unimpeded flow of value between the organization and its customers and other stakeholders.*

To achieve this outcome, we must start with the mindset, not the toolset.

It's all in the mind

Minds are often hard to change, but it can be done. Once changed, minds are likely to stay changed for the same reason. Although the idea of having to do more than an impressive technology demonstration, might be daunting, it can also be reassuring. We have all seen, perhaps given, cool technical demonstrations that were exciting for an hour, and changed very little. Forget about the tools. No business has a problem called "we don't have enough software".

"What's the problem we are trying to fix?" That's the question, and the answer needs to be framed in terms of a mindset of real strategic, operational or tactical improvements if process-based management is to resonate with the gatekeepers.

Modeling mindsets

Different audiences have different mindsets, and require different messages. To understand the differences we should 'model' the mindsets. What are the key players really thinking? What are their current management challenges? Which of the process messages are they most likely to find attractive? What mindsets do they need to have individually and collectively to achieve high(er) levels of BPM maturity?

What do we need to do to close the gap from current to target mindset – a familiar As Is / 2B / 2Do cycle.

Getting minds around "continuous"

Everyone signs up for "continuous improvement". Great idea, why wouldn't we go for that? Well, we also need to get our minds around the certainty that "continuous improvement" also means continuous measurement, change, challenge, activity and organizational friction.

Well worth doing, but what looks obvious and desirable on the poster, can sometimes prove to be quite difficult to endure in the live workplace. It requires an uncommon openness, a different way of thinking about daily workplace operations, relationships, fears and motivations.

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[3] Ibid., p 22.

Mind the gap

To improve a process, we need to find a gap between what is and what might be. In theory, we want to find big gaps so we can make big improvements. However, I regularly meet people who worry that openly "admitting" to a significant process improvement will be seen as a past failure rather than an ongoing success. They can see cost-effective ways to improve a process significantly, clearly a good thing to do, but the same mind that approves the change, has to acknowledge the newly discovered, but perhaps long unobserved, problem or opportunity.

What's the mindset at your place of work? Imagine that a process is found to have been costing, for the last five years, a million dollars a year more than it needed to. Would that be seen to be a sackable offense, or a cause for celebration and congratulation? If you managed large parts of that process, would you be elated or nervous in announcing that bit of continuous improvement?

In Conclusion

We might argue that the mindset/toolset emphasis is 80/20 rather than 90/10, you might even convince me it's 70/30, but it's certainly not the reverse of any of those. To create a viral spread of the idea of BPM, tools and techniques alone won't do it. We also need hearts and minds.

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Let's continue the discussion at the BPTrends Discussion group on LinkedIn (see below) or if you want to contact me personally, please do so at r.tregear@leonardo.com.au.

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