BPM and the Discipline of Execution

Yuri Blyke

As BPM practitioners we often hear of a high level of failed initiatives among the organizations that took a continuous process improvement path. This perceived lack of success is observed in the outright failure to implement BPMS (Business Process Management System) projects and/or institute a BPM practice as part of the organizational transformation efforts. Many reasons are given to explain this phenomenon among which are inappropriate technology chosen to support the effort, lack of focus on the ultimate goals for the initiative, failure to follow some prescribed methodology or "best practices". All these reasons for failed BPM implementation initiatives are valid; however, I would like to provide an analysis from a different, slightly more structured point of view.

Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, in their insightful book "Execution: the Discipline of Getting Things Done", describe a framework for analyzing organizational performance based on what they call "the three core processes of execution" - Strategy, People, Operations. If we boldly apply this analytical approach to a BPM initiative and focus on the actual execution of this initiative, we may discover some uncomfortable facts that may greatly help us improve the chances of success. That is, if we are open-minded and willing to deal with the shortcomings in our organizations.

Strategic Perspective

Looking through a "Strategic" perspective, we would focus on vision and planning by executive management and what actual actions are being taken by the organization's leadership.

- How aware is the senior management team of the changes that are coming from the BPM implementation? Are these changes aligned with the goals of the enterprise and were risks properly assessed and contingency plans developed?
- Are there any other strategic projects being initiated at the same time as the BPM initiative and if yes, are there potential resource constraints, conflicting priorities, and unresolved political roadblocks?
- Were senior managers responsible for the success of the BPM initiative and for championing its implementation involved in the analysis and planning that motivated the project in the first place?
- Is the organization being prepared for a cultural shift that may be required to gain the most benefit out of the new BPM practices?
- Is there an enterprise-wide communication plan that unambiguously shows leadership's commitment to the initiative, explains the motivations behind it, presents a vision of a better future state, and explains how the organization and the individuals involved in it will benefit from this future state?

People Perspective

A "People" perspective provides us with a more tactical view into the day-to-day activities required for the successful implementation of the BPM initiative.

- Are functional leaders at all management levels prepared to discuss with staff the positive changes that will come with the new BPM practices?
- Were the "business people" responsible for regular business functions and the functional "subject matter experts" assigned to the BPM project team involved in any early analysis that motivated the initiation of the project?
- Was any comprehensive assessment of peoples' skills performed to identify potential capabilities gaps with the new BPM paradigm?
- Do project champions and sponsors have enough power and political will to make

     necessary personnel changes, at all levels of the organization, to better align people with the new process environment?

– Do people directly involved in the project clearly understand the rewards of success and the cost of failure, and is the difference between the two outcomes significant enough to increase peoples' motivations for success?

– Are individuals and groups, within and without the organization, who are not directly involved in the project but may influence the future state performance of the BPM activities, "on-board" with the coming changes? Were these changes even analyzed and communicated to them?

Operational Perspective

An "Operational" perspective provides a concrete view into an organization's capabilities.

– Is the organization capable of operating at changed levels brought about by the new BPM practices? The supporting infrastructure for the new paradigm will have to be adjusted or changed – has it been analyzed and addressed?

– Are those responsible for performing key business process tasks, as well as the business process owners, been properly informed of the coming changes and provided with necessary training?

– If in the changed operational environment historically antagonistic groups are now expected to closely collaborate, did the leadership address the possible outcome of this situation and the risks involved?

– Were interfaces to the organization's supply chain partners thoroughly analyzed to understand the impact from the BPM initiative? The previous question would also apply to the organization's internal and external clients - do decision makers truly understand the potential impact of the new operating environment on these two critical constituencies?

Issues listed above may seem like very obvious, common sense questions people would ask during the planning and analysis phase of a BPM initiative. However, it is always surprising how often many of these questions are not raised at all or raised in a very haphazard way just to check off a task on a plan. I believe that good execution ultimately relies on the human factor within an organization. We can see this factor as the common ingredient present in all three "core processes of execution" described by Bossidy and Charan.

So the takeaway from this Article is that even with adopting the "best practices" and selecting the best technology available on the market, the ultimate determinate factor of success of the BPM initiative or any important activity within an organization is the people. It is the leaders, at all levels of the organization, who, based on their experience and commitment, are willing to ask the right questions, challenge the status quo, and honestly deal with impediments that stand in the way of success.

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