

Don't Just Manage – Execute!

Tom Bellinson

Those of us who consider ourselves business process professionals often spend an inordinate amount of time documenting, evaluating and automating business processes. And, why not? It is our special skill. We cannot properly evaluate a process until it is fully documented. Once we have proper documentation, it becomes the best tool to evaluate the process for non-value added and error-prone activities. Armed with good data, we can begin to design improvements (hopefully with the aid and support of process owners and stakeholders).

Human Nature

We are complex beings. Our motivations often conflict. We want more, but we don't want to "do" more. We want excitement, but we don't like change. We like a challenge, but we don't like risk. You get the idea? Just perform an Internet search for "why focus groups don't work." The results will show blog posts, studies and opinions all saying that people "lie." Assuredly, some do, but I suspect most of these people don't think they're lying. They are conflicted.

Why does this matter to a BPM professional? Because it is our job to sell the new process to ALL of the stakeholders. They will tell you they love the new process. They will tell you they can't wait to get started implementing the changes. They are conflicted. The difference between designing a brighter future and having one is in the execution. It only works when everyone is on board. Let's explore what it takes to enlist your team.

Making it Stick

To understand the challenges of changing habitual behavior, it is useful to take a technical dive into the inner-workings of the mind. Brain research is advancing at an accelerating rate, which means that most of what we know, we've learned in that past 10 - 20 years. In a recent study at Duke University by, Henry H. Yin and Barbara J. Knowlton, entitled "The Role of Basal Ganglia in Habit Formation," the researchers explore the nature of volitional behavior versus habitual behavior. What is most striking is the intense power of habits to mitigate the potential for new learned behavior. Once we have committed a behavior to habit status, we stop "thinking." Our brains allow us to simply react by using completely different mechanisms than those we would use to consciously evaluate a situation.

This does not bode well to those of us tasked with changing habits. The Duke study suggests some of the challenges we face as change agents. Because we often embrace the changes we propose, it is hard for us to understand what is necessary to make our proposed changes a "new habit" for process stakeholders. There are two factors that contribute to habit formation:

1. **The number of sessions** – the repetition of learning opportunities, including the time interval between sessions.
2. **The reward correlation** – the consistency of receiving a reward for exhibiting the correct behavior.

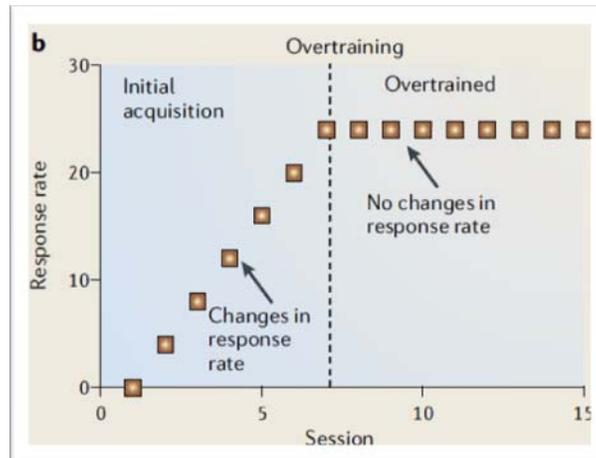
In a scientific study, these tools are standard fare. Researchers have the rigor, time and patience to continue on with the conditioning process until the desired result is achieved. Businesspeople rarely have any of these attributes. This is not a condemnation of businesspeople tasked with behavior modification. The environment is just different. We don't have the time or resources to be overly scientific about implementing changes. So, we do the best we can.

However, armed with the proper knowledge, there are tools and techniques we can use to enhance our ability to change behavior.

Tools & Techniques

Any good manager has a few tricks up her sleeve for getting people to do what she wants. The most common of these techniques is the old “carrot and stick” method. Understand that a “stick” is just a negative reward. Both are essentially reward techniques.

The other tool that is commonly used is training. Each training opportunity is a “session” (per the Duke study). The mistake we make with training is in assuming that once you impart the new knowledge in a training “session,” your work is done. The following chart, taken from the study, lays bare the falseness of that assumption:



Clearly, one training session just will not do. On the other hand, one can only imagine the pushback you would receive if you invited employees back for repeated sessions of the same material. We don't “think” we need more training. But remember, this isn't about “thinking;” it's about knowing.

This is where process tools can be a real godsend. When we use automation to guide a process, we can put obstacles in the path of the status quo. For example, if a help desk escalation policy is changed from four hours unresolved before escalation to two hours, getting a support person to intentionally make the change after having handled thousands of calls using the four-hour rule will be a major challenge. However, if the support system provides an alert after 1.5 hours and disallows updates after two, each experience becomes a learning session.

Now, think of all the processes that don't lend themselves to automation. There are a lot of them. Many of them may not seem mission critical, but they can sap productivity and cause issues affecting the customer experience. There isn't always an easy answer, but it is helpful to understand the nature of human behavior as we set our expectations.

Rewards can be a great tool for all the processes that can't be automated. People like to think they are enlightened and don't need to be subjected to Pavlovian conditioning in order to change. Experience shows that it doesn't hurt either.

We recently got a puppy (Pavlov would be proud of this example) and we started paper training him right away. Every time he went on the paper, we gave him a treat. After a couple days, he was hitting the paper almost every time. We decided we didn't need treats anymore. He decided he didn't need to use the paper anymore. Then we decided we'd better keep bringing the treats. Hey! Who's conditioning who here? In either case, the pattern seems to be taking hold and we're all doing our part.

We like to think that we're better than our other fellow mammals when it comes to building new habits. To the extent that we can recognize the value in doing so, maybe we are somewhat better. But, we must accept the harsh reality that the same basic brain functions are at play when it comes to rewriting our own pre-programmed subroutines. Rewrite them we must if we are to translate process “management” into process “execution.” Many a postmortem on process

improvement initiatives has ended with “that just didn’t work for us.” The reason for these failures is not faulty design, rather a failure to perform.

The Power of Measurement

An important part of BPM is to evaluate the results that are produced after making process changes. Important to whom? Mostly to the architects of the change. They will want to evaluate whether their concepts and subsequent implementation was beneficial and by how much.

However, there is another important constituency in the measurement effort – the process stakeholder. Remember, you’ve asked them to step outside their comfort zone and change their habits. We talked about extrinsic rewards (like doggie treats), but what about intrinsic rewards? “Doing better” is an intrinsic reward and by some estimates can be a more powerful motivator than external rewards.

A 2003 study entitled “Positive Effects of Rewards and Performance Standards on Intrinsic Motivation” by W. David Pierce , Judy Cameron , Katherine M. Banko , and Sylvia So suggests that external rewards do not diminish the intrinsic reward of doing well, if you keep raising the bar on performance levels expected. In other words – people love a good challenge.

It has been said many times before, and worth repeating here: make performance results visible, easy to understand and controllable by those who are executing the process. If the changes to the process are effective, their impact will often increase over time. This is a great opportunity to reinforce changes that may still not seem natural to everyone involved. There may even be doubters that have just been “a team player” who will get completely on-board once the data proves out the concept. Furthermore, process stakeholders may spot problems in the data before the architects of the change.

Instigators of change often have so much enthusiasm that they don’t empathize with the people they are affecting. It’s hard to imagine that anyone wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to make their own job and the firm’s outcomes better. If you are an instigator of change – try to imagine it! The success of your enterprise may depend on it. It is a mistake to assume that just because your ideas are sound, others will follow willingly. They may even want to, but that doesn’t mean they will. They are conflicted.

There’s a story about an early attempt at computerized language translation. The quote “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” was fed into the system in Russian. It returned the English phrase “the liquor is good, but the meat is bad.” Strong spirits are not enough to make change. We must apply continuous effort to put good meat on those new bones.

Author

Mr. Bellinson has been working in information technology positions for 30 years. His diverse background has allowed him to gain intimate working knowledge in technical, marketing, sales and executive roles.

Most recently, Mr. Bellinson finds himself serving as President of a BPM related software start-up company called UnaPage that provides solutions based on Microsoft SharePoint. From 2008 to 2011 Bellinson worked with at risk businesses in Michigan through a State funded program which was administered by the University of Michigan.

Prior to working for the University of Michigan, Mr. Bellinson served as Vice President of an ERP software company, an independent business and IT consultant, as chief information officer of an automotive engineering services company and as founder and President of a systems integration firm that was a pioneer in Internet services marketplace.

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