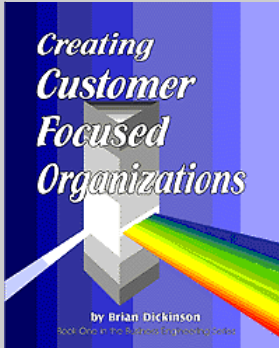


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**Creating Customer Focused Organizations****Brian Dickinson**LCI Press, 2002  
Kings Beach, CA  
\$39.95, 257 pages**by Paul Harmon**

Brian Dickinson gave an interesting and energetic presentation at DCI's BPM conference in New Orleans. Afterwards, as we talked, he mentioned his book, *Creating Customer Focused Organizations*, which I decided I would like to read. At the same time, I asked about publishing something from the book on BPTrends, and thus the May 2005 BPTrends site includes a chapter drawn from this book which you can read as a supplement to this review.

Dickinson started in Software Systems Engineering in the Seventies and has been an independent consultant and author throughout most of his career. He has a wide range experience that centers around two areas: systems and a systematic approach to accomplishing projects. Early in this book he sets the tone for his eclectic approach when he remarks: "I don't care whether you call the process of organizational change "System Development," "Business Process Re-Engineering," "Organizational Restructuring," "Total Quality Management," "Workflow," "Team Building," or "Creating Customer Focused Organizations." Regardless of the name you give it, the goal should be to satisfy whomever or whatever you call the customer." He proceeds to underline this claim by drawing on theories and experiences from each of these domains.

This isn't a systematic book in the sense that the author has a basic model that he describes and promotes. There are some underlying themes -- the importance of systems and the key role of process events are two of them -- but overall the themes are supported by ideas and heuristics drawn from a variety of different sources. Don't read this book to get a step-by-step approach to solving business problems. Read it to interact with a lot of interesting ideas that will make you think. Moreover, since Dickinson uses different vocabularies for different discussions, you will often find yourself forced to consider how you would translate Dickinson's terms into some more conventional set of terms that you might use in talking about processes. It would be tedious if you were reading the book to arrive at a clear picture of process change. If you have the time, however, its just another way in which the book makes you reconsider what you know and helps you clarify your thoughts.

Dickinson uses the term "Customer Focused Organization" in more than one sense in the book. In the broadest sense, however, he uses it to refer to any organization that is focused on systematizing everything that it takes to satisfy customers. Thus, some of us might speak of a value chain or business process where the author prefers to speak of organizing to satisfy customers.

Several chapters review approaches that companies have taken to organizing software systems and Dickinson runs through them primarily to dismiss them and to argue that software systems must be subordinated to the goal of customer satisfaction. Thus, he arrives at the idea of using business processes to organize an IT infrastructure.

The most interesting portions of the book, for this reviewer, were those chapters that focused on events. Many business analysts model business processes without paying much attention to events. Consider the simple flow pictured on the top of the next page:





The rectangles represent activities that take time to perform. The arrows could represent the time that elapses between activities, but usually they simply represent the fact that one activity is over and the next is triggered. They also represent events. In the example above, the successful completion of the customer application review results in an approved customer application. (Some notation systems insert ovals between rectangles to explicitly show the events. Others label the arrows as we do above.) The important thing, for our purposes, however, is that it is events that drive software systems and, ultimately process monitoring systems. We update databases when events occur. We track the occurrence of events to determine how our processes are performing. Thus, for example, we might check to see how many new customer applications have been approved during the past hour or day.

As companies are becoming more concerned with how to automate the management and monitoring of processes, more attention is being focused on events. Different software systems define them and record them in different ways. IBM has recently proposed an Event standard that would make it easier for different software systems to communicate about events.

Just as processes form a natural hierarchy, events form a hierarchy. Obviously if a company wants to move from KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) to performance measures associated with high level processes like Supply Chains and Marketing Chains, and thence down to the subprocesses these processes contain, we must have a clear idea of what events are contained within what others. I'd love to say that Dickinson offers a systematic and comprehensive discussion of all aspects of events, but he doesn't. On the other hand, he offers such a thoughtful and wide-ranging discussion of events that anyone who wants to evolve a systematic and comprehensive theory of events would be well advised to read this book. As I suggested earlier -- Dickinson provides lots of good ideas and examples that will make you think about the whole topic in new ways.

This isn't a book for a business manager -- its a book for someone who is focused on how software systems can be used to support process documentation and management. It's a book that will stimulate you and remind you of all the way that systems in the past have failed to support customers. And it will provide inspiration and lots of good ideas about how systems can be aligned with processes to be much more customer focused in the future.