

Process Pragmatics

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Steve Stanton
Stanton & Associates

Steve@SteveStanton.com

www.bptrends.com

How can you assess your organization's process progress? Where should one look to assess strengths and weakness in the entire set of process activities within an organization? Over the years I have often been asked, "How might an organization's process efforts be diagnosed and evaluated?" What would one look at?

What does process progress even mean? Perhaps the number of process maps in your archive? The number of well-trained Black Belts? The quality of IT support? Or how many of your senior executives can spell P-R-O-C-E-S-S?

Of course not!

The only meaningful indicator of process value lies in the value of economic benefits generated by the quality of an organization's process designs and execution. Progress then simply becomes a matter of improving delivered value.

End of story?

Not so fast. To conduct a meaningful process diagnostic, there are a number of other factors that must be considered.

The fact is that it is not easy to design and execute high performing processes. There is a host of mitigating and complicating factors that get in the way. For example, after over twenty years of process focus, most businesses are still organized functionally, with their core processes fragmented between functions, business units, and geographies. Also, after years of swearing allegiance to the concept of a balanced scorecard, the majority of organizations are still monomaniacally focused on short-term financial performance. These issues absolutely impede the creation of sustainable process performance.

So, to actually deliver **Process Performance**, the premier pillar of process progress (say that three times fast), the other key aspects of process are needed.

For example, the next critical pillar, **Process Measurement**, provides the language that articulates process performance. Without an effective measurement architecture, one that links clear strategic objectives down to process performance metrics, any organization runs the risk of having high performing, but strategically irrelevant processes. When they are identified thoughtfully and calculated well, process measures inform the organization about which processes or subprocesses are doing what they are supposed to and which need to be improved. And since all processes, whatever their condition, need to constantly improve their performance, process measurement is core to a constant GAP analysis that focuses improvement.

Which inevitably leads us to the next pillar, **Process Design**. It is the quality of a process's design, the way the individual tasks are linked together, that ultimately determines its performance. Some designs, like Wal-Mart's supply chain, or Zara's product delivery process, are so well designed that they provide a proprietary strategic difference. A process's design is the living embodiment of the work's

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strategic purpose. Measurement reveals its results, but the design delivers the value.

However, design can never be static. New technologies and competitor and customer shifts place constant pressures on a design. What was once world class can quickly become a competitive disability. The fourth pillar then is **Process Improvement**. The focus of much practitioner energy, the tools, methodologies, and resources invested in this pillar are at the heart of achieving and maintaining high performing processes.

But, for many organizations, putting the right resources in support of process improvement is inextricably bound up with the structural barriers presented by fragmented processes. Typically, no one owns an entire process; both the coherent and integrated design and the prioritized improvement of a process depend on the fifth pillar, **Process Governance**. Without a well-defined and powerful process owner, attention to a process will inevitably be compromised by too much complexity. Without process power, process measures become irrelevant, and process designs, the province of temporary cross-functional “congresses.” Governance, with clear accountabilities and decision rights, is the only contextual approach that powers up process progress and enables the other pillars to operate at peak value.

Where, you might ask, does this attention to process come from in the first place? How does a process owner emerge from the primordial muck of the complex ballet of organizational axes? This is where the final pillar of process progress, **Process Thinking**, drives the entire ensemble. Process thinking, driven by executive awareness – the deliberate marketing of process ideas, embodied in training on tools – is the organization’s collective consciousness about processes. It is the zeitgeist created by all the conversations about processes, their performance, metrics, designs, tools, and owners that occur within an organization. Without process thinking, focused on customers and process performance, none of the other pillars will ever gain a toehold within the crowded agenda of a contemporary organization.

To sum up, process performance is how you make money, but process measurement, design, and improvement operate together to shape that value delivery, and process governance and thinking shape the context to fund, focus, and prioritize the organization’s process attention and resources.

You can’t have one without the others.

So if you’re searching for a framework for a process diagnosis, look no further than the Six Pillars of Process Progress.

