

Steve Schoonover
CEO and President
Schoonover Associates

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How Can Behavioral Factors Be Used to Drive Process Excellence?

I have been in the business of helping people for more than 35 years – first as a psychiatrist and more recently as a consultant focusing on leadership and performance management systems. This combination of experiences has in large part been a quest to enable individuals and teams to change behavior.

One of the most critical things I've learned over the years is that methods for changing human behavior work best when they produce alignment between individual actions and business processes. This initial column explores current challenges and some general suggestions for using behaviors to improve process capabilities. Subsequent columns will focus on topics ranging from designing and implementing behavioral metrics to methods for accelerating behavioral change.

It is common knowledge that new, improved, or changed processes require “new,” “improved,” or “changed” people to implement them. But, as process design and improvement practices have emerged, methods for improving behavior related to process have not kept pace. Almost every project I see involving a significant structure or process intervention is now accompanied by some sort of redefinition of roles and responsibilities. In most cases, however, the focus on behavioral standards and behavioral change is limited. I think that is about to change.

There is a lot of evidence that best practices related to behavioral metrics are starting to emerge. Some of the most interesting interventions I have seen recently include:

- Developing behavioral standards applied to individual's actions related to Balanced Scorecard goals.
- Using 6-sigma methods to define and eliminate “behavioral errors” related to processes.
- Developing competency metrics describing how various practitioners should ideally behave during key steps of a core process.
- Applying multi-rater assessments of competencies as a process metric.

While these selected applications of behavioral approaches for process improvement are encouraging, I think organizations can significantly improve process capabilities by following four simple rules around behavioral metrics.

1. Define appropriate behavioral standards. In general, most process design or redefinition efforts do not entail enough rigor around clarifying how jobs and activities change as processes change. Often process interventions include job redefinition. However, descriptions of changing work activities usually fail to include:

- Clarity about which behaviors are aligned with which steps or stages of a process;
- Objective, observable criteria that can be assessed, tracked and improved;

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and

- Specific “excellence” standards related to the criteria.

2. Develop a consistent measurement approach. Unfortunately, options for assessing “behavior” vary so widely that no clear consensus has yet developed around a best approach. Standardized tests, instruments, assessment of competency models, and direct observation all have pluses and minuses. In the projects that succeed, implementers don’t try to develop the most comprehensive or elegant solutions. Instead, they focus on a practical, consistent method that can be sustained over time.

3. Implement methods for decreasing rating errors. One of the most troublesome aspects of behavioral metrics is that the means of measurement is most often a person’s “perception.” Even with direct observation of work, different assessors can come to varying conclusions about performance levels. In addition, raters of behavior are subject to many forms of bias. Again, many implementers of process change assume that behavior assessment “data” is too subjective, inexact, or variable to be useful. However, there is strong evidence across a range of projects that despite limitations, behavioral data can be used in exactly the same manner as other metrics to drive change.

4. Stay the course. While defining and measuring behaviors that support processes are prerequisites for excellence, the most common problem I see in projects focused on behavior change is a lack of follow-through. Very often, organizations articulate desired behavioral standards to support a process change, but fail to track progress and update standards and the methods for sustaining change. The projects I see that produce the greatest impact over time integrate behavioral metrics into normative day-to-day practices.

All too often behavior change and process change are treated as separate, disengaged efforts. But people make things happen. Their actions are what leverages process capabilities. So, the better we link human behavior to core processes the more successful we will be in producing operational excellence.

