



Practical Process

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Process Lenses

Lenses are used to focus light on what is important. They also focus the eye. Many of you are reading this with the aid of lenses. Beyond the physical optical lens, lenses can also be used as a metaphor for a way in which to see or understand something more completely or differently.

A concrete and narrowly defined view of what a process is and does will quickly reach the limits of its usefulness. A helpful view of a process includes many more lenses than just the one that sees a simple series of activities with a completely internal focus, seemingly unrelated to anything beyond its organizational home, including the customer. To see processes only through this lens may be clear and accurate, but it is quite sterile and of limited usefulness. These more mechanical aspects are important, but are only part of the story. Processes exist in a complex network. Organizational boundaries do not limit the flow of value. The customer of my customer and the supplier of my supplier are important. Processes define capabilities to be exploited by the organization, both internally and externally.

For any organization, business processes are conduits through which value is exchanged between the organization and customers and other stakeholders. In a process-centric organization, the focus is on understanding how to best deliver value to customers and other stakeholders via these conduits of process. As well as activity sequences, our understanding must cover other dimensions of a process such as the chain of value, inputs, performance, reusability, interdependencies, constraints, guides, value propositions, costs, enablers, governance, and effectiveness. Our understanding of a process and its performance is greatly enhanced if we actively examine the whole ecosystem in which the process executes using a series of different lenses.

Some of these considerations will be deeply internal to the process; others will provide an external abstracted view. As I have said in previous columns, I think we need a lot more Balanced Process Management. We need a multifaceted approach, a set of lenses, to focus and shed light on process understanding, description, analysis, and management.

Colored Lenses

Let's color our processes – colors that will identify a full spectrum of ways to think about the purpose, capabilities, and value of the process. We can apply different colored lenses in turn to allow us to focus on particular attributes alone.

Professor Michael Rosemann recently [wrote](#) about “black boxing” and “white boxing” processes. This started me thinking that processes are not monochromatic. Would a rainbow of colors prove useful in process thinking? Would such colored lenses cast new light on process analysis and management? What benefits might be at the end of that rainbow? Could we survive the full spectrum of color puns?

We can use the colors of the rainbow to force ourselves to consider a richer set of process traits. Take each color in turn (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) and think about the process through the lens of that color, with the colors focusing us on the different aspects. Seen through the different colored lenses, our processes take on meanings that may have been previously unnoticed or unappreciated.

Red Lens - Problems

What problems are being experienced in relation to process performance, and what are their causes? Through the red lens we look for all of the problems with the process and understand their causes and the impacts of those problems. Don't just make a list of the problems stakeholders tell you about; analyze the process. We may not be able to fix every problem, but we should know what they are.

Orange Lens - Measurement

How is the performance of this process measured? In too many cases we are asked to "improve a process" (perhaps even continuously!) without having any objective, quantitative measure of that performance. Through the orange lens we determine measures, measurement methods, current values, and future targets. If you don't have good performance measures you aren't managing the process and you wouldn't know if you had improved it.

Yellow Lens - Strengths

What are the strengths, the positives, about the process? Use the yellow lens to make sure you understand what it is about the process that works well and should be preserved and protected. What caused the As Is to be in its current form? Put on your Indiana Jones hat and do a little process archaeology. Dig around to discover the "ancient history" of the process. How has the process changed over its lifetime? What internal or external factors caused those changes?

Green Lens - Innovation

What could be done to create a quantum change in performance for the process? Push the envelope to discover what innovation or reengineering could be used to make massive change. Continuous process improvement ultimately demands discontinuous improvement, i.e., innovation, if meaningful change is to continue. The green lens requires us to think beyond the mundane.

Blue Lens - Compliance

With what policies, rules, regulations, and legislation is this process required to comply? Investigate whether the process actually achieves the required level of compliance. Looking through the blue lens, challenge whether the compliance requirement is reasonable and current or just an historical artifact that irrationally handicaps current performance. How many organizations could provide a list of all the things with which the organization should comply?

Indigo Lens - Execution

What are the people, systems, and facilities that are involved in the execution of the process? The indigo lens filters out everything except what is happening during execution of a process instance. Assess such enablers looking for weak points, such as inability to scale or operation inconsistent with the process performance targets. Are there existing elements that could be used more effectively? What new elements could be added to improve performance?

Violet Lens - Stakeholders

Who cares, or should care, about the performance of the process? It is the process stakeholders – chief among them the external customer(s) – who determine performance targets. Using the violet lens understand who they are, why they care and the impact on them of poor process performance.

White Lens - Integrated

In looking to understand, analyze, improve, and manage our processes, we should consider all of these colored lenses. Taken together, the seven colors give us a complete picture. The blending of all of the colors gives us white. The process white lens gives us the multifaceted integrated view that should be the basis of our process analysis, improvement and management.

Other Lenses

Many other lenses can be used in addition to the colored lenses. There is no need for our lenses to be mutually exclusive. Inevitably, there will be some crossover in the various views we see.

Some other lenses we might use include:

Measurement Lens. Processes are about delivering value so we must measure. The measurement lens focuses us on questions about what we are measuring, how we are measuring, what happens to the measures, what else should we measure, and who cares about the measures.

Context Lenses. All processes exist within a complex network. We often draw them as neat linear flows but that can only be, at best, an approximate abstraction of real life. The BPTrends *Process Scope Diagram*, the Six Sigma *SIPOC* diagram, Rummler and Brache's *Organization Diagram*, Porter's *Five Forces Model*, are all examples of context lenses that we can usefully apply to get a more useful, accurate and holistic view of the process.

Customer Lens. What do our processes look like through the customer's lens? Processes that seem to us to be neat, tidy and efficient may not be so attractive from the customer perspective.

Supplier Lens. Suppliers have a unique view of our organizations and the processes we use to deal with them. Their view of our processes can be greatly informed by their exposure to similar processes in other organizations, perhaps including our competitors.

In Summary

Processes, at least the ones that are worth analyzing, are complex. They cannot be effectively analyzed or managed from a single, narrow perspective. Building a set of metaphorical lenses and deliberately using them to focus our thinking on a range of important perspectives, one at a time, gives us a richer understanding of the context, purpose and performance of the process-in-focus.

I'd love to hear your opinions. What other process lenses do you find useful? Let's continue the discussion at the BPTrends Discussion LinkedIn group, or you can contact me at r.tregear@leonardo.com.au.

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