Leading Process Change – Part Two

Andrew Spanyi

In my September 2009 Article on this topic in BPTrends, I addressed the role of the process leader in the "getting ready" stage of a process change initiative. In that Article, I proposed that leaders need to demonstrate leadership skills at three generic stages of any process change initiative: getting ready, taking action, and sustaining change. This applies regardless of the chosen method to improve a business process.

I suggested that there are two key components in getting ready: building a compelling case for change, and creating the right infrastructure for change. Two of the essential components of creating a compelling case for change are clear connections to both customer expectations and strategic issues. The key considerations in crafting a compelling case for change are

Look at the business from the *outside-in,* from the customer's perspective, as well as from the *inside-out.*

Link to strategic issues (e.g., market share, growth, customer satisfaction, cost reduction, etc.)

Address both facts and feelings.

Use simple, visually gripping support materials.

Specify the risks of not taking action now.

Once the case for change has been made, leaders need to examine the level of urgency. The best test of whether you have a persuasive case for change is whether people are compelled to act. Given a compelling case for change, building the infrastructure for change is the other critical success factor in launching a major process change program. The essential components of building a solid foundation for the change program include assembling a management group with enough power to lead the change effort, creating the right environment for the group to work together as a team, and building a communication plan with a the right mix of media to communicate the vision, method, and goals needed to maintain urgency and focus.

This Article will now consider the role of the leader in the "taking action" stage, and a forthcoming article will consider the role of the leader in sustaining process change.

Assuming that the project has been well defined in the getting ready stage, there are generally three phases in the taking action stage of any process improvement effort; analysis, design, and implementation. Leaders need to act decisively in each of these phases in order to successfully lead process change through activities such as attention to the pacing for the project, building collaboration, overcoming obstacles, and assuring ongoing communication.

Leaders need to appreciate the value of the analysis phase as the means to validate the project definition or charter, gather additional data on the current performance of the process, and gain additional insight into the scope of opportunity for performance improvement.

Establishing the right pacing for the project during the analysis phase is one of the critical success factors in leading a process improvement effort. If project pacing is too slow, then the needed sense of urgency may drop and executive focus may become compromised as other more pressing issues arise. The sign of slow project pacing becomes evident in the analysis phase as too much time is spent on data gathering, analysis, report writing, and preparing PowerPoint presentations. This is most often observed in projects targeting incremental process improvement via methods such as Six Sigma and Lean Six Sigma. If project pacing is too quick, then the opportunity to validate the project definition, gather additional data on the current performance, and gain additional insight into the scope of opportunity for performance improvement may be missed. This is most often observed in projects targeting more radical process improvement. While the degree of emphasis on the analysis phase differs according to

various methods of process improvement, the time involved in analysis should be measured in weeks and not in days or months.

The analysis phase is typically where signs of obstacles to the case for change begin to become evident. This may become apparent by way of decreasing attendance at team meetings or the wording of project correspondence. In order to successfully lead the process change effort, executives must nip such obstacles in the bud. The ease of so doing will depend on the extent to which there's a management group with sufficient power to lead the change effort, and how well the right environment has been created for the management group to work together as a team.

The issues/disconnects identified in the analysis phase can be used by leaders as material to reinforce the case for change. Examples of outdated policies and non-value added hand-offs are particularly useful in reinforcing the theme that "we can do better" and can breathe additional life into project communication.

As a process improvement project moves from the analysis phase to the design phase, it's important for the leader of the change effort to have a stage gate meeting to determine that the key ingredients for success in the design phase are in place. One of the key items to consider here is having the right resources from IT on both the project working team and the steering/management team.

In the design phase, leaders of the change effort need to pay close attention to evolving obstacles to change, the identification of quick wins, and a well planned transition to the implementation phase. In this phase, the obstacles to change typically become even more apparent and can take several and varied forms. Overcoming obstacles and the underlying turf protection will test the resolve of the management group leading the change effort and their ability to work together as a team. It's also essential to assuring the right pacing for the project through the design phase.

Competent leaders of process based change efforts also pay attention to setting a clear expectation with the project team that the team is accountable not just for designing but also for rapidly implementing so called quick wins or short-term gains. Such early gains are essential to demonstrating progress, and the effective communication of these quick wins reinforces the sense of urgency around the case for change.

As a process improvement project moves from the design phase to the implementation phase, again it's important for the leaders of the change effort to have a stage gate review to determine that a well planned transition to the implementation phase is in place. This includes paying close attention to items such as the validity of the business case, assuring the continuity of team members from design through implementation, planning that the needed resources will be available, emphasizing the early completion of quick wins, and building a solid project management foundation.

As the project moves into the implementation phase, leaders need to assure the continuing involvement of the steering team, and avoid declaring victory too soon. Pacing once again becomes a central item of focus, and some of the most significant obstacles to change are likely to arise in this phase as needed resources are diverted. These must be addressed promptly. Further, capitalizing on the communication of realized quick wins is essential to sustain urgency and this is also the time to recognize/reward the contributions of team members.

Table 1 outlines some of the most common pitfalls to avoid in these phases of a process improvement project.

Pitfalls for Leaders to Avoid by Project Phase		
Analysis Phase	Design Phase	Implementation Phase
Pacing too slow or too quick	Failing to set the expectation for quick wins.	Failing to set a high priority in implementing quick wins.
Obstacles to change not addressed as these arise.	Obstacles to change not addressed as these arise.	Obstacles to change not addressed as these arise.
New issues identified are not used to reinforce the communication on case for change.	Failing to leverage communication based on quick wins.	Failing to regularly communicate progress and recognize/reward the contributions of team members.
Lack of attention to assuring that the ingredients for success in the design phase are in place.	Lack of attention to assuring that the ingredients for success in implementing the design are in place.	Lack of attention to assuring that the ingredients to sustain the changes are in place.
		Declaring victory too soon.
		Lack of continuity of Steering Team guidance

Table 1.   Pitfalls for Leaders to Avoid by Project Phase

The successful implementation of process improvements is rarely limited to just workflow considerations and often involves other factors such as job designs, information system issues, structural changes, new measures, revised business rules, skills training, etc. The development of new and improved measurement and management practices is needed to sustain performance improvement.

The role of the leader in sustaining process change will be addressed in a forthcoming article.

Author

Andrew Spanyi's work in the area of process management is recognized internationally. He has written two books on Process Management: *More for Less: The Power of Process Management* and *Business Process Management is a Team Sport: Play It to Win!*

Contact Andrew at www.spanyi.com