

Process As Art and Other Misconceptions

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What is a process? A set of activities that turn inputs into outputs. What is a good process? A process that does what it is supposed to do when it is supposed to do it, reliably. What is a great process? One that is effective and optimally efficient. Are there activities that are not amenable to process? Some think so, we think not.

In our work with companies, helping them understand the value of applying process to their marketing/sales activities, we have found resistance for many reasons. These reasons include the feeling that much of what goes on in marketing is art, and therefore resistant to process management. In every case, what we have discovered is that, indeed, some activities in marketing – in reality, in many business activities – require "artists" to produce the desired output. However, that by itself does not make the output art.

Van Gogh, Monet, Picasso, and others produced art – art as the output of artists. Some art today is produced more mechanistically, and yet nevertheless is art. In virtually all business processes, the output desired is not art, albeit some of that output is produced by artists.

That distinction is important, as evident from a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review*¹ that asks the question, "When Should a Process be Art, Not Science?" The authors argue, "There are some processes that naturally resist definition and standardization..." The authors suggest that good process management principles rely on standardization and that some processes should not be "standardized."

We applaud the efforts to help the reader understand the need for flexible, adaptable processes in many environments. However, to suggest that such processes cannot be defined is short-sighted. While we agree many people, even at the MBA level, teach process standardization that does not make it right. Rigid, standardized processes are sometimes appropriate, but to suggest that all processes should be rigid and standardized makes for the creation of many bad processes.

Our resistance to the primary focus of that article lies in semantics and a premise:

1. The use of the words art or artistic, and
2. The suggestion that sound process management principles cannot be applied to processes which require flexibility and human input

The authors cite several examples, which, contrary to the authors' view, we suggest reinforce that good process management is being followed. A first example of this is that sound process management requires feedback mechanisms.

They cite Ritz Carlton as an example of a rigid process that gave way to an artistic process. In truth, good process management, followed by Ritz Carlton, used feedback to determine that the process being used was not sufficiently adaptable to meet customer requirements. The process was adapted to allow personal judgment to be situationally applied. The result, according to the authors, is happier customers. How do they know? Feedback. However, this flexible process requires additional skills on the part of the Ritz Carlton staff, or the process will fail to "impress the customer."

Could that be defined as art rather than process? We think not. We suggest they have defined a process where particular skills are required. Whether those skills are those of an artist is debatable and not relevant. We agree that all processes that involve human beings require that

those human beings have appropriate skills to work successfully within the process. If "art" or judgment is part of the skills required, then appropriate people must be hired.

They cite piano "voicers" as an example of art giving way to process. Again, this is actually an example of a process that requires an artist with very precise skills. If those skills were not learnable, then voicers would no longer exist. If those skills are extremely rare, then the cost of applying those skills to the one-of-a-kind pianos they create simply makes those pianos more expensive. However, the process for producing those pianos is understood by Steinway and an appropriate artist is used within the process.

While this example may seem "crude," voicers are really no different than having a complex, high precision piece of machinery on a production line versus a less precise piece of machinery. The highly complex machine is used when necessary in the process. The voicer is used within the process to create the piano required by the customer. The fact that the customer's needs are unique and hard to communicate simply makes the job of the voicer more difficult, and the process they follow to complete their work more flexible and adaptable, especially if the customer changes his/her mind.

Returning to the Ritz Carlton example, using good process management practice, we are sure that Ritz Carlton provides additional training or reassignment to employees whose judgment fails to produce the desired results. To suggest this is an artistic process misleads the reader into believing it is a person-dependent process. It is not. The process requires hundreds or thousands of people to do it well, and if someone is sick another person must take their place and perform flawlessly. The process depends on people, and people with sufficient skills to execute it well, but that is not the same as being person-dependent. It is simply a process that is highly flexible and adaptable to the environment. Good processes should be as flexible and adaptable as necessary and no more.

The movement by some within the business process management community to insist upon "standardized processes" is a flaw, driven by a mindless focus on efficiency over effectiveness. Efficiently producing the wrong output is not a good process, no matter how efficient it may be.

The authors suggest process is about removing variation; they are correct. They then argue that some variation is good because that variation meets customers' needs. Also correct. What you have is simply the difference between value-added variation and non-value-added variation, which again is a part of good process management. Non-value added variation should be removed, but to suggest that in all things customers want exactly the same thing is to misunderstand what the customer may value.

To try to further understand the concept of flexible processes, let's consider the three steps they describe in their article for managing art (as opposed to managing process):

Step 1: Identify what should and shouldn't be art. They suggest that this decision is difficult. It is not. Every process is perfectly constructed to produce the results it does. If the process is not sufficiently flexible to produce appropriate results, it is a bad process. That does not suggest art, but, rather, appropriate flexibility. Alternatively, if the process requires artistic skills on the part of one or more of the people involved in the process, then you have to make sure people with those skills work in the process. If the process inhibits the performance of those people, it is a bad process.

Step 2: Develop an infrastructure to support art. This is unnecessary. Again, good processes are sufficiently flexible to produce the required output, and no more so. They also include appropriate feedback mechanisms to know if/when the output is no longer meeting the requirements, so the process can be adapted. (To wit, what Ritz Carlton did.) And, as mentioned previously, the process infrastructure must support the people in the process, whether they are artists or not. They also suggest that the infrastructure have appropriate metrics. We 100% agree.

However, they suggest that somehow internally focused metrics are appropriate for some processes. That is what we did in re-engineering. Metrics fall into two categories: control metrics

and quality metrics. Control metrics are internally focused to assure the process is in control. Quality metrics must focus on the ultimate user of the process output.

They then suggest that you have to get art and science to play well together. If you manage processes appropriately, that is not necessary. Good process management is good process management, and that is where we find our biggest disagreement with the authors. They have constructed a straw man that only exists because too many processes are badly designed or badly managed.

Step 3: Periodically, reevaluate the division between art and science. Again, we agree but insist that good process management is at least about making sure the process is producing the results intended. Efficiency without effectiveness is waste.

It is not about art, as that suggests process management is not appropriate. It is about flexible, adaptable processes. What they call art we call flexibility and adaptability. And, of course, some processes require human beings who may be truly considered artists. That does not suggest they cannot work in a properly defined process. Maybe semantics, maybe more. However, one thing we know for sure: managing processes is easier than trying to manage artists.

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A recognized expert in marketing, innovation and leadership, strategic positioning, and customer relationships, Mitch Goozé is the author of three books on marketing including his newest book, *Value Acceleration*, about using process management principles to improve marketing results.

References

[1] Harvard Business Review, March 2009 pages 58-65