

The Five "Rights" of Business Process Management

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Recently, while working with a client in the medical field, I was made aware of an interesting adage used by those in the nursing profession. It's known as The Five "Rights" of Patient Care and is embraced by those responsible for ensuring that accurate and appropriate care is given to patients. A mistake in their world could result in a life threatening situation. It is critical, therefore, that mistakes are avoided. The Five "Rights" of Patient Care are

- o Right Patient: Make certain you treat the right person.
- o Right Drug: Check that you provide the right medication to the right person.
- o Right Dose: Dispense the right amount of the right medication to the right person.
- o Right Route: Ensure the medication is given the right way (e.g., orally, topically, intravenously).
- o Right Time: If the medication is going to make the person go to sleep, it is probably best to give it to them at bedtime.

The power of this adage is in its simplicity and made me think again about that fine book by Atul Gawande¹, where he brings into focus the importance of checklists. The Five "Rights" is indeed a checklist and one that, with only 5 points, is easy to commit to memory and easy to apply in practice. When followed, it would be very difficult to screw something up.

So, I thought how one might take this simple patient care checklist and adapt it for the BPM profession...The Five "Rights" of Business Process Management, since "screwing things up" is alarmingly commonplace in the world of process improvement.

We approach new initiatives with all the best intentions but too often fail to execute, or execute then fail to show any real, verifiable benefits (ROI) from our work. Too often, businesses fall victim to poorly planned, poorly executed process improvement efforts. They are left with less money and greater frustrations when yet another attempt to repair their troubled, inefficient processes has been unsuccessful. What then? Recommending reorganization or maybe buying some new technologies are options. Those usually take the heat off for a while. Or, we could focus on the basics with five simple checks. Let's see what the Five "Rights" of Business Process Management might look like.

Right Process

Obviously, we have to consider process; we're process professionals after all. That means Right number one would be "Right Process." For any number of reasons, politics, squeaky wheel, easy to work with users, the wrong process is often targeted to be fixed. We need to always ask the question, "Is this process really the place we should be focusing our efforts?" Consider the medical scenario a bit further. When a patient comes in to the emergency room complaining of chest pains and a sore ankle, where does the medical staff focus their efforts? Most likely, they'll make certain the patient is not having a heart attack before tending to the ankle, even if the patient may be complaining more loudly about the ankle.

It's amazing how often process teams go to work on some back office process improvement because they have support from departmental management or it's just easier, while their critical customer-facing processes are in cardiac arrest!

Another thing the emergency room staff does is to very quickly hook the patient up to monitors, checking vital signs, and so on. They do this for the obvious reason that without current information – metrics, they can't possibly make an intelligent decision as to what course of treatment is most appropriate.

Here again, we usually fail miserably in the "process" emergency room because we simply do not spend enough time or effort measuring and monitoring performance before we begin our treatment. The result of this haste is often the death of the project, death of the process, or, in extreme cases, death of the business.

Selection of the right process, especially in an organization where process thinking is not the norm, is absolutely critical. It takes some intelligence and research to know what the "right" first process is. Take time for some business triage before determining what processes are in need of treatment, which processes are likely to yield business value if treated, and which ones have the greatest chance of recovery from the treatment. There's little point in saving a process that really should be left to die in the first place, or just left on life support. If a process does not add tangible business value, don't waste your time improving it.

Right Solution

There are usually multiple ways to treat business issues. Too often, we take the easy route and throw technology at the problem. If we again liken this to patient care, we have Right number two, "Right Solution." More and more, health care providers are pointing us toward natural remedies; exercise and diet vs. medication, for example. If we consider how much business value can be realized simply by modifying how we do what we do (i.e., true process improvement), we may be able to either avoid investments in new technology or better leverage the technology we already have.

When technology is necessary, we should be certain how it will be of benefit. If a healthcare provider gave us a pill and said, "Not really sure what impact this is going to have on your condition, but let's give it a go," it wouldn't instill much confidence. We want the provider to tell us what we can expect.

Yet process and technology professionals will plead their cases for new technology not really knowing how or if it will address the business problems it is purported to solve.

Applying technology to a business model with limited understanding of what can be expected is simply unprofessional and should not be done. Granted, we can't always know exactly how a certain technology will perform in different environments, but we should be able to predict with a high degree of confidence the business value we expect to realize. And if we are monitoring performance as we should, we'll know very early if we are realizing the desired results. Process teams, uncertain of outcomes quite possibly are looking at the wrong solution, or are lacking the skills and analysis needed before prescribing an expensive and perhaps unnecessary treatment.

Right Scope

Scope creep is nothing new to those of us who have come from the IT world. Software development projects routinely struggle with scope management. Scope creep is expensive, time consuming, and increases the risk of project failure. Right number three is "Right Scope."

IT projects usually creep up from added requirements and functionality, resulting in further analysis and more lines of code to be written and tested. Business process projects can creep for the same reasons, but requirements and functionality can be dramatically broader. Where an IT project may need to add a field to a screen, or code some additional validation checks, a process team may be directed to look at an additional line of business, or include a supply chain with several business partners, or document process flows for branch operations at multiple locations. These kinds of change requests can add months of effort to a project and cast the team into a downward spiral of endless analysis and process modeling.

Prescribing the right dosage, right scope, for an improvement effort can mean the difference between success and failure. Taking 2 antibiotic pills twice daily can kill an infection in 7 days. Taking 4 antibiotics a day won't kill the infection twice as fast. Teams that try to take on a process that is too large will most likely become frustrated, lose management support, and fail to deliver much, if any, value to the business.

Manage scope and don't attempt a radical, cross-enterprise treatment unless it is absolutely necessary. Smaller scope efforts can show value quickly and are more likely to be well received. Process improvement will be recognized as a credible approach to treating business problems.

Right Message

Process improvement is about change. People, in general, don't like change. That's just the way it is. As process professionals, we need to adopt a bedside manner that will communicate confidence and assurance and set people at ease with change. We need the "Right Message."

How we position, market, and communicate the message of change will, in large measure, determine how successful we are in effecting change. Do not take shortcuts or underestimate the effort necessary to develop a solid message.

Change and culture go hand in glove. Cultural impact must be assessed as part of process improvement. Processes cannot mature independent of cultural change. Crafting the right message means understanding the context in which that message will be received. Is the culture one of rapid growth and frequent change? Has the organization been around for decades, continuing to do things pretty much the way they have always done them? Does management support and embrace change? Are people rewarded for creative thinking? Knowing the answers to questions like these will help guide what messages need to be crafted and shared.

Don't underestimate the need to market new ideas and concepts. Since change is hard and makes people uncomfortable, we need to share information about new ideas more than just once or twice via email. We need to allow people time to get comfortable with new ideas, to allay their fears, and market the value of the change. Everyone needs to know "What's in it for me?" We may watch TV commercials over and over and still not be able to name the product being sold. Start marketing change well before implementation, crafting messages for both global audiences and individual, one-on-one, water cooler conversations. Every change needs an "elevator pitch."

If we want people to embrace change, we need to equip them with the appropriate information and right message for them to do so.

Right Time

Timing can be a friend or foe when it comes to process change. Consider all the activities that are taking place in your organization at any given point in time; year end closings, end-of-quarter sales pushes for quotas, reorganizations, moves to new locations, launching new products, the list goes on.

As with understanding culture, it is important to understand what activities or events are occurring in an organization that may be captivating everyone's attention. If I'm being asked to deliver a significant month end report, or push to close a pending deal, now might not be the right time to hit me up with process change, no matter how wonderful that change might be. I'm simply not in a position or in the right frame of mind to deal with it.

We need to know our audience, know what is going on in their world, and be empathetic to their situations. Great ideas introduced at the wrong time can quickly become really bad ideas. Our good work could be all for naught. We may not get another chance to introduce it again because the idea, the process change, is now tainted. More than once I've heard it said, "No, we tried that once before and it didn't work. We're not going to do that again." In reality, it wasn't a bad idea at all, it was just bad timing.

Conclusion

No matter how long we have worked in a given profession, we can always benefit from refocusing on the basics to improve our performance by following some simple checks. Am I targeting the right process, with the right solution? Is my scope too big -- Will it take too long to succeed? Is my message on target and informative? Is this really the right time, or should I wait until conditions are more favorable?

- ✓ Right Process

- ✓ Right Solution
- ✓ Right Scope
- ✓ Right Message
- ✓ Right Time

Author

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References

¹Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* (Henry Holt & Company, LLC, 2009)

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