Is BPM a Fad or a Discipline?

When Nixon visited China in 1972 he asked the Premier, Zhou Enlai, if he thought the French Revolution had been a success. Zhou Enlai famously replied that he thought it was a bit too soon to tell. I'd say about the same thing about Business Process Management.

Most would agree that we have been working at process change for a very long time, and working at it very seriously since the Industrial Revolution. Fredrick Winslow Taylor wrote his book, *Scientific Management*, in 1911 and Henry Ford introduced the idea of a systematically designed moving production line at about the same time. Ever since, we have been talking, writing, researching, and meeting to share best practices and to develop methodologies, notations and a BPM discipline.

We have gone down various side roads at times. Rummler introduced the Human Performance Improvement approach to process work in the early Eighties. Motorola wedded HPI with Quality Control to create Six Sigma in the late Eighties. AI theorists developed rule-based systems to capture human knowledge in the Eighties. Hammer, Davenport, and others introduced Business Process Reengineering in the early Nineties. Womack and others told us about the Toyota Production System – which they termed Lean – in the Nineties, and the folks at Carnegie-Mellon developed the

Capability Maturity Model around the same time. Software vendors introduced workflow and ERP software packages in the late Nineties. During this same period, the rule-based software vendors shifted and began emphasizing Business Rule systems. In the mid-zeroes, the Internet and XML kicked off the BPMS software tools - and this list only deals with the, more or less, core process initiatives. I'm ignoring the Excellence and the Innovation movements and many of the other popular business fads that have had their 15 minutes of fame and then disappeared.

The question is this: Is BPM one more fad - just another iteration of the ongoing concern with process that will enjoy some attention and fade - or are we at a point where we can create a discipline that will have some lasting impact on the way organizations are structured and managed? As I suggested above, the only honest answer is: It's a bit too soon to tell.

Let's step back a moment and ask what we mean by a discipline. Probably most of us would agree that law and accounting are disciplines. There are graduate programs that train students to be lawyers and accountants. In many cases, there are tests administered by professional bodies or by the government. More important, these courses and tests are based on an internationally recognized vocabulary and best practices which, in some cases, are mandated by law. There are certainly new challenges for lawyers and accountants – how to deal with Internet publishing and copyrights of all kinds, for example – but the foundations of both disciplines are relatively well established.

How about Project Management? There has been a lot of work done in the past twenty years to define best practices in

this domain, and there are tests and certifications offered, although few would say that project management is as well defined as a law or accounting. Still, a group of dedicated people have gone a long way toward establishing Project Management as a coherent body of knowledge and practices.

How about Business Management, in general? Is management a discipline? There are libraries of books and college graduate programs devoted to Business Management and many companies are run by MBAs. On the other hand, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, individuals that most would agree were outstanding senior executives, are without undergraduate college degrees, let alone MBAs. So, is management a discipline? Does it have core knowledge and practices? Is one certified?

And, that brings me to Business Process Management. (Or Six Sigma, or Lean, or…) Again, at best it is an emerging discipline. There are books that disagree over basic concepts. There are some certification programs, but they are inconsistent regarding core knowledge and best practices. There are college courses - and this is perhaps the best sign - that offer degrees and conduct research. Most of the college programs that grant degrees in BPM are located in the IT curriculum, while only a few are located in the business school and focus on business process management practices. Still, good research is necessary to form the basis for any discipline, and BPM programs around the world are increasingly undertaking research and teaching practices that support the range of knowledge and skills associated with BPM.

Companies have clearly defined jobs for lawyers and accountants; however, most don't have clearly defined jobs for BPM practitioners. While a few have Chief

Process Officers, there is no clear understanding or agreement regarding the roles and titles of BPM professionals.

What's even more worrisome is that discussion groups reveal that few BPM practitioners agree on even basic terms. Imagine an accounting discipline in which no one could agree on what should be on a financial statement, or how to define a "debit" or a "credit." There is currently much discussion about "Competencies," but it could as well be about "Processes," or "Process Management." Every new term that comes along seems to gather its own group of enthusiastic advocates.

The best that can be said is that many business process practitioners are struggling with these issues. The Association of Business Process Management Professionals (ABPMP), a non-profit association, has created a BPM Certification, as has the OMG, and the American Society for Quality (ASQ) is trying to do something similar for Six Sigma and Lean. And, many other organizations are working on standards and defining best practices. BPTrends has supported several efforts in the past and is currently working with the OMG, the IIBA, and Queensland University of Technology to standardize a basic vocabulary and best practices for BPM.

In the current BPTrends survey, when asked what is holding BPM acceptance back, the majority of the respondents said that it was "too many process approaches competing for executive attention." Agreeing that Lean, Six Sigma, BPM, BPMS and much of what ERP seeks to accomplish, are all variations on the common theme of BPM would be a big step in the right direction, as would getting agreement on job titles and roles.

If BPM is to become a discipline, we need to begin by supporting efforts to establish

a basic vocabulary and a body of best practices, and then we need to defend this core knowledge against those who would change it quickly or casually. This isn't to suggest that we rigidly maintain older usages in the face of change, but that we struggle to define a set of basic principles and a core vocabulary that can be refined and extended in a systematic manner.

Till next time,

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