Real World Business Processes: 'There is no such thing as a bad example'--'After the Fire Alarm'
01/07/2015
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Rationale for this Article

Two months ago I wrote an Article about the screw ups that happened to derail the end-to-end process of getting a passport renewed. I vowed at that time to keep telling my personal stories whenever I had a new experience that made me think about processes that could be better. A few days ago I had another that was intriguing to me and got me thinking. It was in the middle of a fire alarm in my condo at night. I hope you can relate to it and extend the lessons learned to your business processes. Let me know what you think on the BPTrends Linked-in Discussion Group

The Fire Alarm Story

I actually got to bed early one night last week and was sleeping like a baby when the fire alarm went off in our condo in downtown Vancouver. Very groggy, I rolled over and said to myself that this was surely a false alarm and if I wait long enough the alarm would be turned off and I could go back to my peace and quiet. Although I knew I was being irresponsible, I was not too concerned since we live on the third floor and if worst came to worst I could climb down the tree close to the balcony. What could go wrong?

After several minutes of an ear piercing racket, my wife, who had gone to check it out, came back into the bedroom and told me there was actually smoke visible outside but that the hallways seemed clear. She insisted we should leave to be safe. Grudgingly I agreed and fumbled around half asleep searching for outside clothes. This had to be the night that the cold weather hit Vancouver (I know the Midwesterners have no sympathy for our pathetic excuse for what's cold) and so we dressed up and headed down the fire stairwell and out the building. Remarkably it seemed that the rest of the 22 story building actually heeded the alarm and were out already looking at us and projecting thoughts of 'Why did you not get out already?.' By now three fire trucks had arrived and firemen were checking out the scene with some scary looking tools like fire axes from a horror movie.

After it became clear that someone had set their sofa on a balcony alight and that everything was going to be OK, we were told that no one could take elevators back up until the fire department had reset them. This was clearly a business rule that makes sense, driven by a policy of safety if we are to avoid premature danger of returning before a safe situation was established. So we waited some more in our middle of the night fog for the word that we could go back. In the meantime we were reminded that we came down the stairs but could not go up the stairs to our floor since there is a security rule that you cannot access residential floors except by using

the elevator that is coded to your security fob for your floor and that rule was still in place during an emergency. So wait we did.

Analysis of the Situation

So now I'm awake on my feet and thinking. Going through my mind is the question 'How will all these people get back to bed quickly given that everyone will undoubtedly flock to the elevator to get on first. It was clear to me that this approach would be incredibly inefficient except for the first load up and even that would not work well for people on the 22nd floor if the elevator stopped at every floor on the way up to let people off. In addition that would mean that the two elevators would take a lot longer to get back to ground level and everyone would wait longer than optimal. So what's the best way to do this assuming one could actually get everyone to follow a plan? I started bemusing how to do this out loud. A person next to me then asked 'Are you an engineer?' I responded yes I am, but worse, I am an industrial engineer and a process consultant, and I admitted I could not help analyzing the situation since for me it is an occupational hazard that takes over everywhere I go even in the middle of the night. So we got into discussion about the best way to do it.

Our first idea was to get everyone organized by floor and everyone on each floor would go together in one elevator. That way an elevator would do a dedicated trip there and back, and we avoid extra non value added stops. We agreed this would be very Lean. We would start with floor 1 and work up one at a time so we got more people up more quickly even though the top floor people would wait longer than anyone else. Someone snobbishly said that would not be seen as fair since high floor people paid more for their condos than everyone else and expected to be served faster. Someone else from a lower floor sarcastically said that they liked the idea that the high flyers would have to wait longer.

Next someone said that we should put one person from floor 1 to 11 on the first elevator and they would go up and go to the locked exit door and hold it open so that everyone from those floors would walk up. This would then enable the elevators to be more quickly usable by those with the farthest to go while the lower floor walkers were walking up. Someone from a lower floor said that would not be fair if the upper residents got to ride and why should they have to walk. One response to that was 'Suck it up – you could use the exercise'. Another said 'You can still wait till everyone else has gone and walk up last.'

Someone else suggested a priority scheme. Apparently there are elevator riders that should be given the opportunity to go first. Suggestions for the decision criteria were that those with a clear handicap of some type should be allowed to precede others. The logic of this argument seemed to be acceptable to a lot of people. A suggestion was to also add senior citizens to this cadre. Then someone else suggested that anyone with small children should go first. One resident with a yappy animal suggested that if you had a dog or a cat that should qualify for early admission because their darlings might make even more noise if it took longer and they could not use the stairs. By my estimate that meant that half the residents would have a claim on the first shift. It got even crazier when some people started saying that they had an early meeting the next morning and needed to get to bed as soon as possible.

My assessment:

Why could not everyone agree what to do? The simplest answer is that no one had determined the goals, policies and success criteria up front so we all would have a

shared plan that was based on the best process design to make it happen. As you can infer from the discussions, when the situation occurred there were many possible ways of getting the job done. I know it is not a matter of life and death getting back to your condo after an alarm but there are comparisons to the processes that have emerged in our companies and this silly example illustrates what happens in businesses all the time. Was our target to get the most disadvantaged residents to their condos the fastest? Was it to achieve the fastest overall time to get the last person up? Was it to get the speediest average time or the lowest mean time (it's different than the average)? What are the KPI measures for this process? Once you have chosen them, what target performance level do you want to achieve and what's the best way to do it beyond that interests of each individual?

In the end, the homeowners' response was to do what they though was best for themselves, just like what happens in business where individual and divisional incentives trump what is best for the customer and the company overall. When the fire crew left the building everyone outside the building rushed for the two elevators and each trip stopped at almost every floor with a very long wait time for the next group on the ground. As in business, everyone in the building that night did what was best for themselves personally, seemingly oblivious to how their actions were to the detriment of the overall performance of the process. The question now is will the condo strata corporation or management company learn from this and find a protocol for next time. Somehow, I am skeptical.

That's how I see it. How do you see it? Let me know on the BPTrends Discussion Group on Linked-in.

About the Author

Roger T Burlton is the co-founder of BPTrends Associates, the services arm of the BPM knowledge portal BPTrends.com and the President of Process Renewal Group. He is the author of the thought leading book 'Business Process Management: Profiting from Process'. He is considered the industry leader in the introduction of realistic ways of implementing enterprise BPM programs as well as innovative approaches for organizational and process change. He is the author of the 'Business Process Manifesto' which is now available in fourteen languages. He is regarded as a realistic practitioner, who delivers pragmatic solutions for his clients. He has helped over one hundred organizations implement BPM as a corporate strategy in many different industries, countries and cultures. An exceptional speaker, he has chaired over forty high profile conferences on Advanced Business Architecture and Process Management around the world. To date, he has conducted over seven hundred seminars and has presented to over sixty thousand professionals. His seminars have been translated for diverse audiences around the globe.

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