Practical Process Roger Tregear

Continuous Problem Finding

Everybody signs up for *continuous improvement.* The other side of that coin is that in order to continuously improve, we must be continuously finding things that are not working as well as they might. That may not sit as comfortably; it might be quite challenging to be proactively uncovering problems. If process improvement activity is to deliver its maximum benefit, we must be continuously discovering problems—and their causes, and finding new opportunities—and the constraints on their realization. The fabled directive "Don't tell me about problems, tell me about solutions" may not be so useful after all[1]. No problem? That could be the biggest problem.

We all like to report the good news, and that's usually what the audience wants to hear as well. If there is any bad news, we probably save it until the end and frame it as a list of "ongoing challenges" or some other suitably vague phrase that attempts to hide the blemish on our otherwise pristine report. Why do we do that? Wouldn't it be better to expose problems so they can be solved by the team? That's certainly the Toyota view[2]. Jim Wiseman, Toyota's Vice President of External Affairs for two decades, is certain that to get better every day, problems come first – always[3]. This was demonstrated to him very clearly when presenting a report to Fujio Cho, a former President and Chairman of Toyota. "One Friday, I gave a report of an activity we'd been doing and I spoke very positively about it; I bragged a little. After two or three minutes, I sat down. And Mr. Cho kind of looked at me. I could see that he was puzzled. He said, 'Jim-san. We all know you are a good manager, otherwise we would not have hired you. But please talk to us about problems so we can all work on them together'".[4]

To improve we must first discover the problem or opportunity. The more improvements we make, the harder this becomes. We start out dealing with the obvious and soon find ourselves having to look harder to discover the next improvement. Improvements are still there to be found, but they won't jump up and identify themselves quite so readily.

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[1] If it ever was useful. It seems more than a little strange to tell your staff to only bring you the problems they have already solved—and learn to live with the rest? That casts managers as scorekeepers rather than players.

[2] Yes, I understand the irony of using Toyota as an example in the light of current fines and lawsuits for the "unintended acceleration" problems. Not saying they are perfect, just a great example of many, but not all, aspects of corporate performance and process management.

[3] Magee, D 2007, *How Toyota Became #1: leadership lessons from the world's greatest car company*, Penguin Books, London.

[4] Ibid, p149.

'Continuous problem finding' requires the right mindset and toolset, supported by leadership and a personal, team and organizational culture that values improvement. Former Toyota President, Katsuaki Watanabe, states the case quite bluntly, "At the very instant that we become satisfied, at the very moment we think that the status quo is good enough, that's when we start to decline."[5]

In a process-centric organization, finding a problem is a cause for celebration. This is the lifeblood of continuous process improvement. Feeding the voracious circle of continuous improvement requires active searching for process performance anomalies. In many organizations this is quite counter cultural. It doesn't feel right to start your report with a list of things that are not working, does it?

You've probably been to events celebrating the solution of a problem. When was the last time you were invited to a celebration to mark the finding of a new process performance problem? What can we do to create a culture of constructive continuous problem finding?

Continuous?

> *Continuous* adj. 1. having the parts in immediate connection, unbroken. 2. uninterrupted in time; without cessation[6].

Let's deal with the elephant in the room. Can we really do "*continuous*"? That's a heavy load to place on those working in and on our processes. Improvement of business processes "*uninterrupted in time; without cessation*"? Really? Probably not.

In the BPTrends Discussion Group on LinkedIn, Alec Sharp recently offered an interesting perspective on this topic[7]. He usefully suggested that "regular improvement" might be a more practical aspiration than "continuous improvement". The key point is that "continuous" should not become "frantic" with 100 ideas a day, none of which get properly considered and implemented. Improvement needs to be considered, controlled and effective. It also needs to be happening 'all the time' in a way that gives each change time to be properly considered and carefully executed, and for its effect to be accurately analyzed.

Perhaps we can agree that we should be *thinking* about improvement "continuously", and *making* improvements "regularly".

The Last Word

Whatever adjective we prefer, viz. continuously, regularly, or some other, the emphasis should be on the last word, "improvement". The only reason for doing any sort of BPM work is to improve the performance of business processes. If this is not happening the whole deal is, by our own definition, waste. Process improvement projects need to make change, not just recommendations. We must be able to

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[5] Osono, E, Shimizu, N, Takeuchi, H 2008, *Extreme Toyota: radical contradictions that drive success at the world's best manufacturer*, John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey.

[6] Macquarie Dictionary, Macquarie Dictionary Publishers, Sydney, Australia, viewed 17 March 2014, http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/features/word/search/?word=continuous&search_word_type=Dictionary#

[7] BPTrends Discussion Group, LinkedIn, viewed 17 March 2014, http://www.linkedin.com/groupItem?view=&gid=1175137&type=member&item=5840528241667878912&commentID=5843190155241873408&qid=ea527213-ae70-4a97-9d86-dcfd9c3ce7e9&trk=groups_items_see_more-0-b-cmn#commentID_5843190155241873408

demonstrate, with credible, objective data, that the performance of important business processes is improved.

In the phrase "continuous improvement" (or indeed just "process improvement") there is often not enough emphasis on the second word. If the focus is on change quantity rather than quality, we run the risk of being distracted by symptoms rather than root causes, and creating 'change churn' which is always going to be difficult to deal with.

The key is to actively measure process performance *and respond* to the measures. Every change is an experiment. If we can prove that the changes led to improvement, then that can attract support and, therefore, be sustainable. 'Continuous change' without evidence of meaningful improvement is never going to be popular.

To be able to do this we need to identify processes, set targets for their performance, collect performance data, and assess the performance gap to determine what, if any, action is required. If we aren't measuring process performance, we can't know if improvements are being delivered. As Winston Churchill wryly reminded us "However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."[8]

Everybody's Job

We don't want 5 process analysts, we want 5,000. Everybody needs to be a process analyst. We can't leave the job of finding problems, opportunities for improvement, to people who have the word "analyst" in their job title. Continuous improvement is everyone's job. Therefore, finding problems is everyone's job. If an organization is to have a genuine program of continuous improvement, it must have a personal, team and organization mindset that means people are consciously searching for process improvements. Most organizations don't do that well. It won't just happen – such a culture needs to be deliberately created and continuously nurtured.

This needs to start at the top. Leadership at all levels is required to demonstrate the behaviors that support stated values about improvement being part of everyone's role. People need to have the time, resources, encouragement, and feedback required to make continuous problem finding, and hence improvement, everybody's job.

Finding Problems & Opportunities

Toyota President, Katsuaki Watanabe, again gives us blunt clarity, "Problems must be made visible"[9].

To continuously, or at least regularly, find problems and opportunities, an organization needs to be consciously looking for them. Finding cross-functional process problems is probably not part of anyone's BAU focus. Having the time to look for improvements in a process that is not actually broken might be seen as a luxury. Given the chance, people generally like to find improvement opportunities; they are

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[8] Winston Churchill. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved March 17, 2014, from BrainyQuote.com Web site: http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/winstonchu135256.html

[9] Magee, D 2007, How Toyota Became #1: leadership lessons from the world's greatest car company, Penguin Books, London.

usually delighted to be asked and often have a ready list of ideas developed over years of work in the process.

Some simple strategies that might be used to create a culture of process improvement are as follows:

- Engage staff, and perhaps customers, suppliers and other stakeholders, in the task of 'problem/opportunity discovery'.

- Create an uncomplicated scheme for the submission and rapid assessment of ideas for change.

- Publicly acknowledge the receipt of ideas, especially those that are implemented to good effect.

- Record and publish the cumulative impact of process improvements.

- Convene short sessions in the workplace where staff can identify and discuss problem areas and ideas for improvement.

Shigeo Shingo worked closely with Taiichi Ohno and others to build the Toyota Production System, the source of much of our process improvement thinking. He speaks here of "waste", but we can easily broaden that to process improvement more generally, "A positive attitude is absolutely essential to waste elimination. As long as we affirm the present condition by saying there is no other way, we will miss opportunities for improvement. We cannot find and eliminate waste if we are not looking for it."[10]

In Practice...
There are many things you might do in response to the issues discussed in this Column. Here are four of those things you might consider doing now to get started on the creation of most sustainable process-based management.

Get active—search for problems
Search and you will find; sit around hoping, and you will be disappointed. Active searching for problems and opportunities is the only way to achieve "continuous", or even "regular" change. Implement an effective improvement suggestion scheme for staff, customers and suppliers. Run problem/opportunity discovery events. Celebrate, or at least acknowledge, the discovery of new problems and opportunities.

Create a process view
It's much easier to find process problems if you know what the processes are. Create an enterprise process architecture that shows at least the top two levels of the process hierarchy. Use that architecture to coordinate the search for problems and opportunities.

Mind the gap
A process problem is a gap between the desired and actual performance. An opportunity for process improvement is a way to close the gap between target and actual performance—or go beyond the current target to a new level. You can't do any of that effectively unless you have defined the performance gap. Set performance targets, measure actual performance, and 'mind the gap'.

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[10] Shingo, S 1989, A Study of the Toyota Production System, Productivity Press, New York.

Tell someone who cares

The organization chart is silent on who should worry about cross-functional process performance. Appoint Process Owners, or whatever role title you prefer, to be accountable for doing something when process performance is out of the agreed range or trending in that direction.

Let's leave the last words to Taiichi Ohno, the master of process improvement. He had a simple and provocative view on problem finding, "Something is wrong if workers do not look around each day, find things that are tedious or boring, and then rewrite the procedures. Even last month's manual should be out of date."[11]

Let's continue the discussion at the BPTrends Discussion group on LinkedIn.

About the Author

As a Consulting Director with Leonardo Consulting, Roger Tregear delivers BPM courses and consulting assignments around the world. Based in Canberra (Australia) Roger spends his working life talking, consulting, thinking and writing about analysis, improvement and management of business processes. His work with clients is on short and long term assignments, in organizational improvement and problem solving based on BPM capability development, and business process, analysis, improvement, and management. He is available to help small and large organizations understand the potential, and realize the practical benefits, of process-centric thinking and management. Contact Roger at r.tregear@leonardo.com.au.

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[11] Magee, D 2007, How Toyota Became #1: leadership lessons from the world's greatest car company, Penguin Books, London.