Should Every Manager Be a Process Manager?

By Paul Harmon

Roger Tregear wrote a great column for BPTrends in April of 2014 (i.e. *Continuous Problem Finding*) in which he pointed out that most companies talk about "continuous improvement" without quite facing up to the fact that continuous improvement depends on continuously discovering situations that can be improved.   In the classic Toyota example, the employee team is constantly examining what they do to try to figure out how to do it a little faster or a little better. That sounds great, but most of us realize that there has to be a limit to the improvements that a team can make in the nature and sequence of their physical moves. Imagine being at the Olympics. You can see what the fastest runner in the world does. But can you really imagine how to improve on it?

One answer is that one can improve processes in many different ways. One can improve the sequence of moves that human employees undertake, but one can also improve the quality of the decisions they take by defining the decisions with business rules, or automating them entirely, using software. One can improve the way managers provide feedback, so employees know that their work is on target, or one can improve the incentive system to increase motivation. Similarly, one can work with the upstream process to see that items arrive in the correct order and to eliminate rejects. Or one can work with IT to rearrange computer screen layouts to make the entry or retrieval of data more natural and thus faster.

I could go on with this list, working through all of the types of things that process analysts learn to look for when they take a good process analysis course. The point here, however, is to lay the groundwork for asking what managers ought to know about processes and how to redesign processes – and, perhaps, more broadly, what employees should know.

You can't drive a continuous process improvement program by relying on BPM specialists. There will never be enough and they can't be everywhere all the time. BPM analysts are great when you have a major process that isn't working, or when new hardware or software becomes available and you decide to redesign a process from the ground up.   To constantly improve business processes, however, requires that local managers and supervisors work with their employees to improve processes on a day-by-day basis. That, in turn, requires that local managers and supervisors know about processes – think in terms of process improvement – and have some basic knowledge about the best ways to go about improving a processes. It also requires that the managers encourage a culture in which employees feel free to make suggestions or try experiments.

This is asking for a bit more than you might imagine if your idea of a process is a production line like the one at Toyota. Most workers don't work at jobs that are naturally sequenced by a flow of assembly work. They apply knowledge to deal with constantly changing

circumstances. Some respond to customer requests or complaints. Some seek to sell products to prospects. Others attempt to reconcile a client's medical history, searching files and old records to determine the client's latest bill. Others work on a team to try to define a new policy for overseas deliveries. All of these tasks require more knowledge of what goes on in a business process than one finds in the simpler process models often associated with manufacturing processes.

If a company is serious about trying to continuously improve its business processes, it needs to institute a training program to teach managers, supervisors and employees about the nature of process and about the major ways they can improve processes over the course of time. They need to know how to develop good metrics and collect and interpret data.   They need permission and encouragement to experiment and explore new approaches in systematic ways.   Equally, once managers and employees have learned a bit about how to improve processes, they need to feel like the organization supports any efforts they make to improve their existing processes.

Whatever one might say about the limitations of Six Sigma, in the early days Six Sigma practitioners made a major push to get everyone involved in an organization involved in business process improvement. However much one may like BPM or various IT initiatives, they are much less likely to focus on engaging employees and local supervisors. Too often those who practice the top down approaches come in, from the outside, analyze, prescribe, make changes, and then leave. Only rarely do the outsiders stick around to work with the supervisors and employees who have to actually implement the process. They don't stay to assure that the supervisors and employees understand the new process, or that they accept an obligation to move beyond what they receive and tailor and improve the process to make it even better.

Any manager or supervisor can read books on process analysis and design and start to improve work within his or her own domain. To really have an organization-wide effect, however, senior management has to get behind major process training efforts. Middle managers need process improvement goals and incentives.   Local supervisors and employees need to be trained and then recognized and rewarded when the achieve significant improvements.

Nothing I've said here is new. All of it has been demonstrated and shown to be successful. Everyday companies are faced with lots of challenges and distractions. It's so easy just to focus on just getting the work out while ignoring the learning and growth initiatives that lay the groundwork for continuous improvement. Ultimately, it's what differentiates the real winners from those who finish third, fourth or worse. Those who finish first find the time to get everything right.   They find the time to train and lead and they manage to continuously improve.

Any organization that wants to dominate its industry has to figure out to create and then continuously improve their business processes. That means they need managers and employees throughout the organization who think process and who work to improve their processes. It takes time, training and ongoing senior management support to create that kind of organization. Organizations that want to finish first need to figure out how to do this.