Managing Ongoing Processes

When most process practitioners think of business process work, they think of redesigning or improving processes. In fact, all processes have two phases. During phase I they function as they are designed to function, working from day to day to produce products and services. In phase II, remediation is called for and a team is set up to redesign or improve the business process. If you think broadly about the lifecycle of a business process than the time the process is being systematically changed or redesigned is only about 10% of the overall time. Ninety percent of the time a typical process functions as its intended to function.

You might ask why process practitioners need think at all of phase I processes -- they are the concern of line supervisors and middle managers, after all, not of redesign specialists.

There are two answers. First, successful redesign efforts should consider why the process needs improvement. In some cases, the process needs redesign because some aspect of its normal phase I operation is defective and is causing the problem that led to the need for a redesign effort in the first place. Consider what occurs as a phase I process is executed:

The manager sets goals for ongoing process achievements. The manager arranges a budget for the process and assures tool and an environment is provided for the employees who execute the process. The manager or supervisor establishes, or at least enforces company policies and business rules that establish constraints on what employees can do during the execution of the process. The manager measures results and provides feedback to the employees who are working to execute the process. The manager arranges to train new employees to execute the process and then provides the employees with feedback as they do their work.

A quick glance at the list above highlights two things. A process may be narrowly considered as a procedure or a sequence of activities. But when we consider why a process may fail to generate the desired results, the procedure is only a small part of the potential problems. What the process manager or supervisor does is very important, and what employees do is also critical. Managerial planning and policies and business rules is also a critical key to results.

Consider one bit of planning. Employees need tools, be they pens, computers or wrenches, to perform tasks during a process. If the manager or company fails to provide the tools, the employees can’t perform the task. If enough tools are not

Or consider another problem, items needed in the execution of the process. This relates to management's inventory planning, and to the efficiency and effectiveness of suppliers. Employees can't assemble, wrap, or stamp items if the necessary supplies aren't available when they are needed. If they are late in arriving, then the process will necessarily operate in a suboptimal manner. It's the responsibility of managers and supervisors to monitor supplies and inventories, and to check deliveries to assure that employees have the supplies they need, when they need them. If managers fail to do their work properly, then the business process they manage will function in a suboptimal way. In many cases, senior managers will realize that the process is defective, but will suspect that the process is deficient because it is improperly designed, or because the employees are doing something wrong.

I won't even go into the ways that ineffective or inefficient software systems can cause processes to fail.

I have said all this to emphasize that process practitioners have two responsibilities: to monitor on-going processes and do what they can to assure everyday processes are being executed effectively, and, occasionally, to redesign processes.

The fact that process work should include both phase I and phase II efforts is a strong argument for positioning a business process management (BPM) group outside of IT – which is much to narrowly focused to get involved in management issues. Instead, a BPM group should report to the COO or the CEO. The group needs to be headed by someone who can talk as an equal with other senior managers, and who isn't afraid to say that the managers responsible for the processes are failing when that is the problem.

It's also important because business processes need to be monitored at the corporate level, and when problems are found, someone needs to be in a position to examine the processes, as they are operating (phase I) and consider if an intervention in process management or employee training would be appropriate. In many cases, a change in management practices can improve a process quickly, without the need to drill down into the flow or automation of the specific processes.

Geary Rummler, a leading BPM guru with a strong background in psychology, used to argue that 40 percent of process problems were management and supervision problems. That fits my experience with lots of processes in many different industries.

I've seen managers set impossible goals, ask employees for results that are incompatible, reward employees for behaviors that are incompatible with established goals, ask employees to follow policies that everyone agrees are incompatible with good results, or punish employees for doing what is necessary to achieve desired results. I've observed supervisors ask employees to perform tasks that couldn't be done without training, or asked employees to sit through hours or days of training that was irrelevant to their jobs (a form of punishment). And I've watched managers mess up inventories and then complain when work grinds to a halt for lack of necessary supplies.

Don’t get me wrong: Processes need to be designed effectively, and employees need to be trained, but managers and supervisors also have a role to play in the smooth and effective execution of a business process – and the managerial portion of the process matrix needs to be executed effectively on an on-going basis, day-by-day. If it isn’t, then the best designed process will fail to produce great results.

This concern with the management of specific processes is another reason that process work at organizations only really functions well when senior managers are actively involved in process improvement. When GE was really concerned with pushing Six Sigma to improve business processes – at a time when their CEO said that process improvement was the most important job he was focused on – the CEO made achieving Six Sigma goals a major part of every manager’s performance evaluation – and promoted and fired managers depending on their results. It such a company, processes and results improve.

In way to many companies, process work is like applying bandages. The process team waits until they hear of a serious problem – often resulting from new technology or IT that needed to be installed – and then rushes to the scene to fix a process. In an amazing number of cases, the process redesign doesn’t work – in spite of a new design, employees fall back into old ways of doing things and the changes are rejected.

This is just another way of saying that the BPM team focused on a phase II effort and ignores the phase I activities than can make or break any process design. Process practitioners need to understand what is happening on a day-to-day basis. What is the manager doing to enforce procedures, to motivate employees, to set goals and provide supplies as needed, and to measure and reinforce appropriate employee behaviors. If the manager or supervisor wasn’t doing a good job before the process was redesigned, chances are they won’t do a good job after a BPM team redesigns the process, and the results won’t be improved.

Process practitioners need to understand phase I process issues, they need to understand the importance of process management, and they need to figure out how to help process managers and supervisors do a good job. It’s a key part of the work companies require of their process improvement people. Making sure it happens is a key role of senior management. Without it, process improvement efforts won’t get much in the way of results.

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