

Remembering Geary Rummler

Our company founder, Geary Rummler, passed away in October 2008 and given how much recognition he has been given by BPTrends for his pioneering contributions to the field of process improvement and management, we thought it would be okay to note some of the things that people, five years later, seem to recall most about him. When we are approached, usually at a conference, by someone offering reminiscence about Geary, the story told is usually something about the following (sometimes all four at once):

- His love for modeling
- His troubled relationship with technology
- His wicked sense of humor
- His generosity

We agree that these were indeed some of the attributes we often saw in hanging out with Geary, so while trying to avoid turning this into a deep wade into nostalgia, here are a few true-life tales to illustrate these characteristics:

He could model anything...

While listening to a friend recount the ups and downs of his marriage, through the dark days of a near-divorce to a dramatic reconciliation, Geary seemed to be doodling on a piece of paper. Then he showed us a flowchart that traced the journey of that marriage. The map had all the major phases, steps and decisions, from initial inputs to final output. (The friend was astonished, or maybe a little blown away at having his life reduced to a diagram, but he pocketed that piece of paper.)

Geary often said that modeling was his way of understanding the world, and until he could draw a picture of something, he didn't fully comprehend it. Many of his tools and concepts evolved from his frustration with being unable to get one of his current tools to accurately depict what he was observing or thinking, so he would make up a new tool. That resulted in the greatest collection of analytical devices that anyone in our field, to our knowledge, has ever produced.

In a 2007 interview with ASTD's T&D Magazine, he was asked the question, "You have been criticized for your abundant use of complex diagrams in your books. Given the chance, would you do them differently now?" Geary responded, "Definitely not. I might make better diagrams but certainly wouldn't stop making them. On one level it's like saying to a mathematician, 'Couldn't you do without all those formulas and numbers?' You can list variables that affect organizational results, but words can't show the relationships between things—a diagram can."

That said, there is no doubt that many of Geary's (and our company's) diagrams and charts are complex (though never as complex as the reality they attempt to depict), and it takes practice to draw even sort of like Geary did.

In the early years of developing his process improvement methodology at Motorola, his chief tool was a function relationship map, or FRM (example shown in Figure 1). While an FRM can be simple and straightforward, in Geary's hands it would be employed to depict incredibly complicated scenarios. I (Alan) watched in amazement as he worked with a Motorola manufacturing group, standing in front of them for three days while concocting an FRM that captured every detail and nuance of their operation. Nobody but he could do this. And in fact, one reason he eventually began using swimlane charts instead was because several of us helper bees complained that we were incapable of developing FRM's like his, but a swimlane chart (which at the time he used only occasionally) was more structured and easier for us.

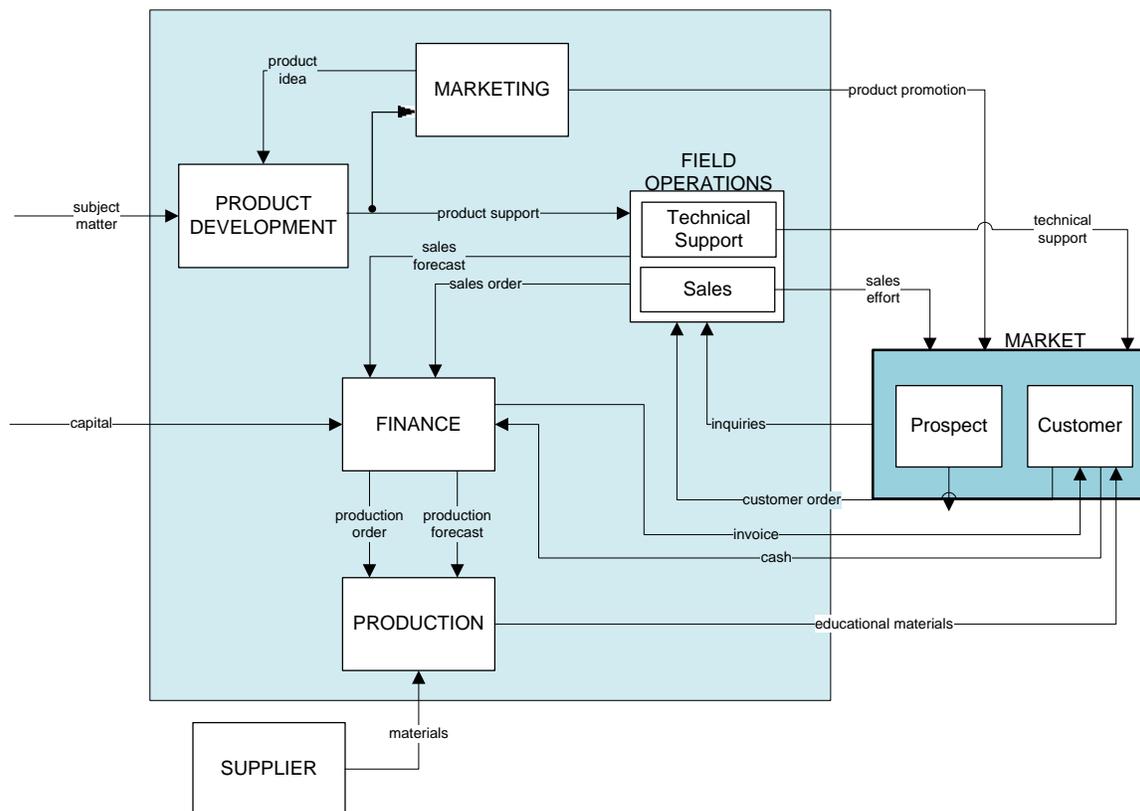


Figure 1, Rummler's Function Relationship Map (FRM)

Almost a Luddite...

Geary's career spanned the decades that began with IBM 360's that filled a room to computers in your pocket. He was young enough to see all the miraculous benefits of information technology but old enough to be a skeptic. Yet when he did latch onto a given technology, he adopted it for life. In the 1980's he bought one of those electronic whiteboards, which you could draw on and then print a copy of your drawing on thermal paper. The image quality was often terrible and the paper would curl up in balls, but it was advanced technology at the time. Geary loved it—and

almost 30 years later, he was still using it. Geary spent years traveling with his vast collection of overhead transparencies that he used for presentations and workshops. Those of you who saw Geary present in those days may recall that the films were covered in marker ink by the end of the presentation. He would wash them off in the hotel bathtub each evening to get them ready for the next outing. We spent years trying to get Geary to convert to PowerPoint decks, but he would not budge until the tablet computer with stylus came on the market, which allowed him to cover the images with electronic ink just like his old transparencies. He did finally admit that he didn't miss the washing in the tub routine.

Like many older folks, new technologies could baffle and frustrate Geary. He was the only person we ever knew who needed help setting up an I-Pod. On the other hand, he recognized how significant technology had become to the workplace by the 21st century and despite his misgivings, he devoted considerable time in his last few years learning about the intersection of process and information technology from such mentors as Paul Harmon and Ken Orr and seeking out client engagements that allowed him learn more. Learning drove Geary. He never ceased learning.

His Sense of Humor...

Geary he had a nose for phoniness and nonsense, and he could put that to use on the job. For example, while he was a strong believer in quality and the quality movement in America, he did not like the religious overtones that some gurus encouraged. So he once wrote a satire, purporting to be an internal memo from one chairman of a Japanese company to another, congratulating themselves for convincing gullible Americans to spend millions of dollars on kaizen and other notions, which would eventually lead to their financial ruin. Not wishing to offend current clients, he decided not to publish the paper, but it *was* funny.

His Generosity...

Geary was a prolific writer and presenter on the subject of performance improvement. His writings and presentations were never the sort that teased with only glimpses and hints at the "secret sauce." Instead they were openly shared case studies, methods, tools and insights. We have created the Geary Rummler Publication Library in order to make these still relevant articles available to the next generation of performance improvers.

Recently we established a discussion group on Linked-In called the Rummler Legacy Group and its purpose is to engage all those people who were influenced by Geary Rummler, of which there are many, in a host of different disciplines, from HR to Quality to Training to Process Excellence to IT.

Geary affected a lot of people when they were early in their careers in whatever their field, as they were casting about for how to succeed in business or make something of themselves. If you ran into him at a conference or other public event, you could go right up and talk to him. You did not have to be a friend of his, or a collaborator, or a co-worker or employee, necessarily. You just had to be interested, and he would talk with you as long as you wanted. Sometimes he was so willing to share what he was doing that it alarmed those of us in business with him ("He's giving away our stuff!") but that never seemed to bother him. Perhaps because he saw his

work as being as much about the advancement of a science as it was the running of a business, he shared openly. He was the ultimate collaborator.



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