Time for a TUNE-UP

We spend countless hours putting processes in place. We have order processes, complaint processes and communication processes. And, we have other processes that support those processes. It becomes an endless cycle. So, when do we stop the presses and pay close attention to the effectiveness of these processes? This article details an approach for making sure your service processes are achieving their aims.

Before we cover the approach, it is important that the underlying premise be explained. It is, quite simply, that we often institutionalize processes and then forget about them. So, whether they are working or not, they continue to exist, become hardened and nearly impossible to change. In these instances, the processes take on a life of their own. Their original intent was lost long ago. Case in point, a financial institution still requires customers to complete a lengthy paper process to apply for loans. The turn around time is five to seven days. When asked why they don't have an online application with a quicker turn around, the reply was, "Our customers don't want all that fancy stuff!" Says who? They never bothered to query customers about their satisfaction with the process.

Overview of the 4-Step Approach

When faced with these institutionalized processes, there is a four step approach that we can use to evaluate their utility and effectiveness. The first step is *Process Analysis*. This requires that an unbiased body deconstruct the process into all of its elements. The second step is *Process Simplification*. This is when we boil the process down to only the essential elements. We will also identify the missing links and insert them. The third step is *Feedback Integration*. We compare customer feedback with the new process. We look for disconnects and technological deficiencies. The fourth and final step is *Process Redefinition*. Using the data from the *Feedback Integration* team, the process gets refined. This step is complete with measurement tools and markers. The process can never again take on a life of its own, so there are built in measures for continuous process improvement. In this step, we test the new process in a small market to see how well it works. Once the process has been tested with a random group of employees and customers, we can further refine it.

Each stage of the approach is completed by a different cross-functional team. They are responsible for delivering results in a specified period of time and then passing those results on to the next team. These teams model an adaptation of the *Rapid Results Initiatives* detailed by Nadim F. Matta and Ronald N. Ashkenas in, "Why Good Projects Fail Anyway."[1] These mini-projects are ideal for this approach to process restructuring. They deliver quick, accurate results, have a specific product and typically last no longer than three months. This model differs in terms of timeframe; from start to finish it is somewhat longer. Think of each of the four stages as an individual rapid results project. Matta and Ashkenas' model, like the approach detailed in this article, calls for collaboration with customers. This enables each team to understand customer frustrations, issues, needs and quality standards.

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[1] Adapted from "Why Good Projects Fail Anyway," by Nadim F. Matta and Ronald N. Ashkenas, **Harvard Business Review**, September 2003, pp.109-114.

Evaluating Service Processes

by Joanne L. Smikle

The Approach

Let's address the four-step approach in detail. Beginning with *Process Analysis*, a cross-functional team that is not wedded to the existing process, is charged with pulling it apart. They are responsible for dissecting every single step, both the formal and the informal, in the process. I mention formal and informal because when faced with cumbersome processes, many customers will find (or create) their own short-cuts. For example, my least favorite department store has a silly return process. You cannot get a refund or charge credit, only more merchandise. The line for purchases cannot take returns, but the return line, while the sign says it will only take returns, will actually take returns and purchases. So, the smart move is to go in with your return, shop for the new merchandise you want, stand in the return line and complete both transactions. But, if there is a process-stickler working, you may have to accept the store credit and then stand in another line for the purchase. When that's the case, just go home.

Because of the informal customer-created solutions, it is essential that they be queried when you are analyzing the process. Focus groups work best for this. Getting their input will reveal not just the short-cuts, but also the pitfalls that may not be obvious to service providers.

The *Process Analysis* team documents both the formal processes and the short-cuts. This is especially cumbersome when customer-related processes have become convoluted or overly complex. No matter the level of difficulty presented, the first step requires that we labor through detailing each and every step. It is also helpful to detail the amount of time it takes to complete each step and the resources involved. I encourage my clients to be very detail-oriented with this particular exercise.

I encourage them to identify who is responsible for each of the steps. Looking at all of the steps helps to build genuine empathy for what customers' experience when they interact with your company.
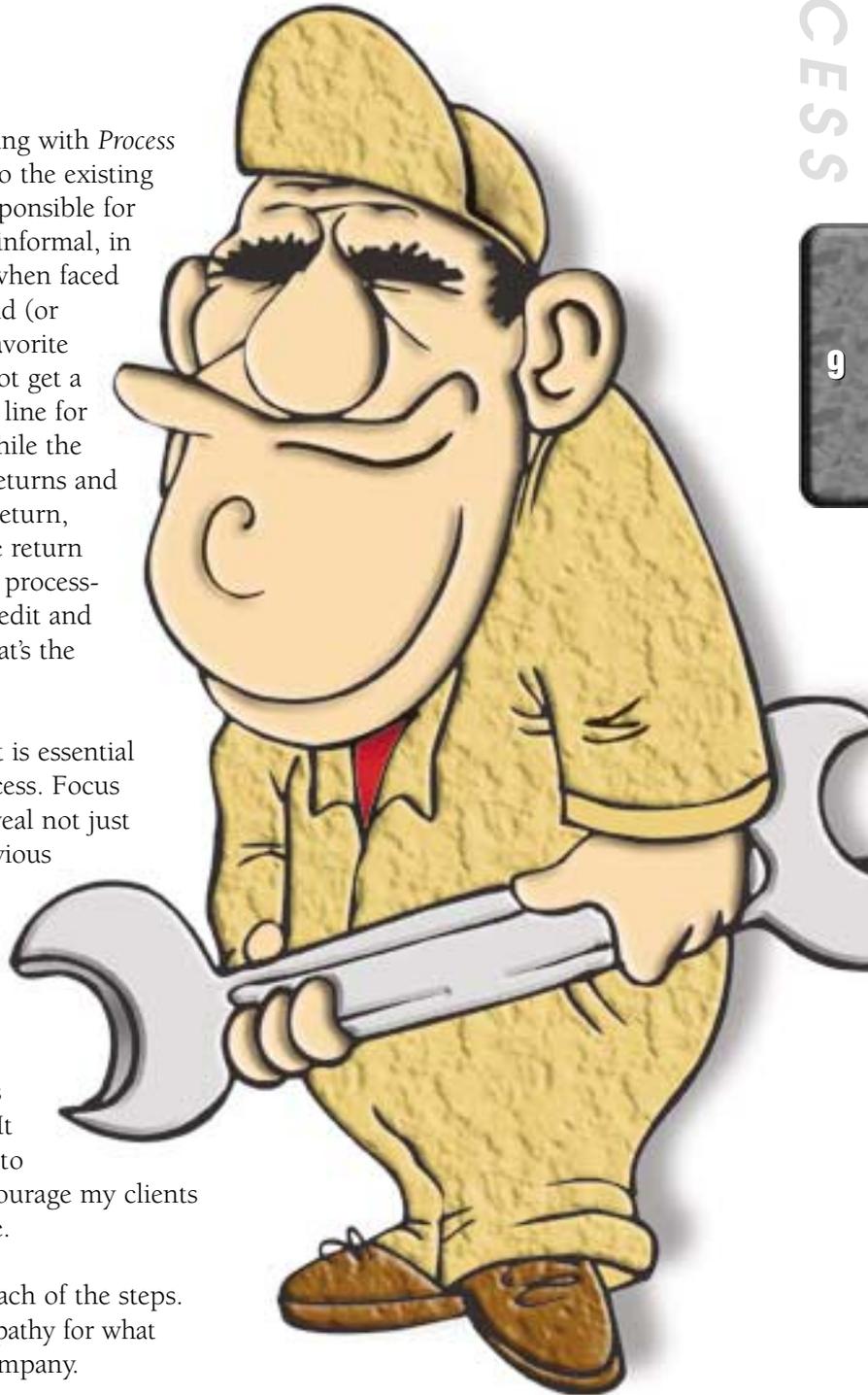
Be sure and include frontline service providers during this initial query. They will know details that team members may not. It is helpful to include frontline representation on the teams that tackle each stage of this approach.

The *Process Simplification* team should be comprised of another cross-functional group. Why, you say, is another team required? Because it allows for maximum input. It also allows a fresh perspective and fresh ideas. This group is responsible for whittling the process down to only the most essential elements. They will pull the "must-haves" together into a coordinated process designed with the customer in mind. This group will also use focus groups to see if their model really does make sense to customers. Again, don't forget frontline input on your simplified process.

Feedback Integration is where the going tends to get tough. Another team is comprised to be certain that the feedback gathered from customers in the first two focus groups is reflected in the simplified process generated by the *Process Simplification* team. I suggest that all of the feedback be grouped into like categories to make it easier to handle. Once the data is grouped, the process is then tested against the feedback. Does it meet the demands customers' articulated? Does it reflect an understanding of the customers' needs? The next question for the *Feedback Integration* team is, "Do we have the technology to support the process?" If not, appropriate technological supports have to be built before the new process is implemented.

Once the *Feedback Integration* team has tested the process against customer requirements, they are then responsible for making sure that the process also matches the feedback that they have gathered from employees. Does it meet the needs of both constituencies? In the event that only one of the constituencies can be honored, it should be the customer. After all, they are the reason for our existence. The result of this team's work is a matrix that shows where the process does or does not match the feedback. The matrix should also show the gaps in the organization's existing technology. They are then ready to pass the baton on to the last team.

The final team is the *Process Redefinition* team. They review the matrix, revise the process, and then test it in a small market or at a small site. This team is also responsible for building continuous improvement steps into the redefined process. These tools enable the organization to avoid the institutionalization of another process. Continuous improvement strategies may include using point of sale/point of service inquiries at regular intervals to measure customer experiences. It may also include online surveys to gather feedback. Additionally, regular conversations with service providers should be a part of the strategy.

Implementing the Approach

This structured approach to process revitalization is designed to take no more than five months from start to finish. Using the principles of *Rapid Results Initiatives*, fast turn-around of a specific product, this approach allows the organization to be very focused on improving its process in a short timeframe. This model prevents analysis paralysis in that it is action-oriented. Further, the model integrates feedback at every stage so that the end product will accurately meet customer needs.

Certain supports are required for this process to work. First, leaders have to be comfortable allowing meaningful decisions to be made at the team level. They have to trust that they have comprised capable teams able to deliver in the time allotted. Second, communication between the teams and leadership has to be fluid. If additional resources are required, be they human or technological, the teams have to be able to get them without a lot of bureaucratic red tape. Because they are charged with quick, quality results, the teams need as few roadblocks as possible. Third, team members need adequate leave from their primary responsibilities. If improving processes is a priority, demonstrate that by allowing team members to focus on this project. It is foolish to expect that team members can handle the pressures of this rapid results work along with their regular duties. Fourth, in some organizations it is necessary to have an external facilitator guide all of the teams. In other organizations, internal facilitation skill is high. In either case, it is important to have a powerful sponsoring executive who can allocate resources for the teams. Be honest about the facilitation skills available and commitment from decision-makers before beginning the approach. Both are required for success.

Summary

This approach to process redesign is unique in that it utilizes a collaborative method, integrated feedback and quick results. Using this structured approach allows you to not only dissect the processes that impact customers on a daily basis, but also to prevent processes from becoming stale or obsolete. When you have finished using the approach and have a tailored process in place, celebrate the successes of all the teams. Then, modify the approach and use it on other processes throughout the organization.

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