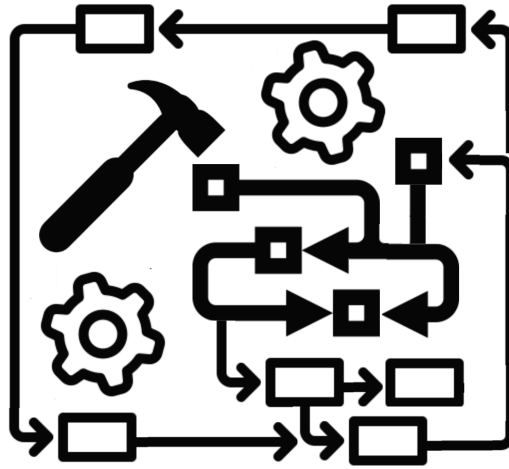


The Problem with Processes



“90% of performance problems are in your processes, not with your trained people”

Too many organisations provide short-term fixes to their existing process problems rather than investigate the root cause of the issues. It takes a unique type of individual to first accept that there are process issues within their organisation, and then to look at methods to solve process issues and prevent further problems surfacing. One of the unfortunate disadvantages of processes is that they tend to attain a level of authority that is difficult to challenge or change, so people live with them and then others look to work around broken processes to get their jobs done. Very few organisations regularly assess their processes and once they are created they are left undisturbed for years, even though the business may have moved on since they were created. There is a natural tendency to think that more of anything good/more processes are better, and that a vast library of processes to address every perceivable eventuality is a good thing. However, there comes a point where the sheer vastness of the process library starts to become an issue in itself. There is no formula that states how much or the quality of processes that must exist for an organisation for optimal performance, because each organisation is unique and depends on their people, skills, behaviours and understanding, and this varies with time through the lifecycle of that organisation.

Processes are a good thing if they can help streamline, standardise and sequence complex, difficult work that needs specific artefacts created or intervention points. Processes don't take the place of good people, good management, good controls, good data collection, good analysis, good decisions, good judgements or good execution. Processes can augment deficiencies in skills, help reinforce learning or unlearning (when a workflow needs to change or a new approach adopted) and provide guidance in terms of checklists and best practices. That said, inefficient and dysfunctional processes are often a primary cause of unhappy customers, dissatisfied suppliers, poor staff morale, stressed colleagues, missed deadlines, variable quality, increased costs and internal organisational disharmony. When processes are perceived by your staff as being cumbersome, frustrating, at odds to their stated objectives or recognised by your business as being costly, not adding value or out of date, then it is time to start really focusing on this issue. The lack of processes is just as bad as when they overwhelm an organisation. There are also organisations that have spend vast sums of money on what are called 'Rolls Royce' process solutions, that although tick all the right quality boxes, are not really followed in practice. A balance has to be achieved between an appropriate level of process, but in practice this is very hard to determine and it depends on what needs to be achieved, how it is being achieved, how welcome people are to the standardisation of this type of work, the cost of implementation/operation and what are the limitations that need to be overcome.

The key issues with respect to processes is either to stop issues happening, develop an efficient way of monitoring and recording or to fast-track standard business activities. Processes must be developed and executed in an end-to-end approach, so understanding what they do and how they do it in relation to other organisational processes is critical. For example, it is pointless to improve your manufacturing process in isolation, if the connecting engineering and logistics process can't keep it, because you are just created delays and waste. Be very wary of implementing local process improvements without understanding the whole enterprise process and impact.

One of the best indicators on how good an organisation is with respect to their overall processes, is to look at their new starter (induction) processes and their leavers (knowledge capture) processes. This provides an indicator in how the organisation treats, values and utilises their key assets (their people), because all processes ultimately start or end with people wanting to do something in order to achieve an output/outcome. The second indicator is whether the organisation has a unified and authoritative list of acronyms and glossary of terms. This second factor shows if the organisation speaks with one voice, and if not, provides you with an indication of the level of fracturing and broken unity within that organisation (with all the follow-on problem that then accompany this and how easy or hard your job will be to execute in that organisation). This has a knock on effect in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency of the communication, management, control, change, risk, opportunity and knowledge management system, and the resultant human emotional and performance factors (i.e. culture, recognition, reward, blame, intervention, promotion, partnering, trust, ethics).

It has long been understood that one of the best ways to improve productivity is to look at improving the business processes, through talking with the people that do the process day in day out. Too many initiatives come from well meaning external consultants that attempt to apply a well proven technique that may have worked well in another organisation, and then apply it directly to your organisation without understanding the culture, people or skills/education of your organisation. Leadership does not like uncertainty or chaos, and seek to standardise work through the implementation of processes that promise to solve all these unknowns. Once processes have been created, it can be very difficult to change, replace or remove them at a later date. KPIs are an example of where something set at the start of a service based contract, is very difficult to change later on. Very few contracts allow for a 'bedding in period' where KPIs are evaluated, modified or improved after a set period that is used to find out what actually is happening and what can be done to improve it for both parties. In one real world example, an organisation had required a supplier to provide 100% availability (set by the procurement department staff) on the proviso that the end users had to undertake specific maintenance at set periods. Operational priorities meant that the end users had more urgent local tasks to complete before undertaking the maintenance activities. The contracting organisation went mad because they couldn't hold the suppliers to account, when their own people were not doing what they had signed up for. This is a classic case of the procurement department establishing a process that was flawed from the start and was not representative of the real world. No amount of processes or process improvement is going to help you if you don't understand your business, and that knowledge is not in the management chain but in the heads of the people that actually do the work on the shop floor.

In one organisation, there were countless discussions over many months about what constituted the right level of percentage people trained. A directive for Corporate came out that as a minimum the engineering organisation should be looking for an 80% value to be deemed acceptable. The engineering department could not decide how many people actually worked in the department. Questions were raised about whether this included the engineering administrators, the seconded staff from other departments, the number of contractors employed each month, could long/short term sick people be excluded, what was the time before a new starter was added to the metric, when to remove people that had left the organisation (at the start/end of that month), were the leadership included and up to what level, and who compiled the records each month. A generic process had been developed and

If your processes are too complex, not accessible or easy to read/update and re-distribute, don't align with the tools, techniques or working practices that are used in the organisation, or can't be learnt or appreciated at a high level for a new starter within a few months, then you are in a very bad place to start with. Process improvement starts with asking the basic Kipling six honest serving men questions (i.e. what, why, when, how, where, who) followed by documenting the end-to-end processes in terms of their individual elemental required inputs, desired execution, recorded assumptions, delivered outputs and monitored outcomes. Making sure that all individual elements interface to each other in the right order (with no outliers, broken links and right start/end points), have the required levels of decision and assessment/review points, and are all wrapped with an appropriate governance mechanism (i.e. terms of reference, roles and responsibilities, strategic steering board, operational risk/architectural/engineering/change boards and tactical meetings/delegated approvals, escalations, reporting structures, improvement groups). If you are not asking the right questions, capturing the right data and undertaking the appropriate analysis, then you will never get the right options to help solve your people take the right decisions to help solve your problems.

The final assessment of your processes should be to review their appropriateness and validity, both in terms of are they doing what they are capable of, what they aren't capable of doing and are they still doing it to the right level today. Processes are a method of formalising standard work (things you understand completely, do regularly and want repeatability). Processes are not very good at making decisions, identifying shortfalls/effectiveness or undertaking reviews or assessments, generally all the things that people need the rights skills, experience and training to accomplish. Organisations traditionally struggle to implement coherent and effective communication, requirement generation, risk/change, ideas/opportunities and test/certification processes because they involve cross functional contributions and actions. Processes don't work well in unstructured environments, where there is a lot of change, not much data, and where agility and flexibility are the key to success. Organisations that tend to thrive in these environments tend to be new starters that have modular, multi-disciplined structures to perform well as opposed to the more structured and fixed larger and more mature organisations. Something to watch for it that your processes don't become a straight jacket or self-imposed limitation to your continued evolution. The drive for leadership to reduce uncertainty and chaos is often through the implementation of more processes, without removing the legacy processes, thus pushing you more and more into the straight jacket. No one process or approach will work for all scenarios, so you must put in processes to allow you to be fixed and firm in some environments, and then to run wild and free in other environments. This is the ideal solution, but very few organisations ever achieve it or continue to achieve it over time.

Organisations typically implement ITIL style processes such as the 'help-desk', when in fact they don't understand their business and people don't really like using help-desk facilities. What people want is for the organisation to understand their business enough that they as customers don't experience the issue because the organisation has already taken proactive action to eliminate it a long time ago. The help-desk is a reactive type process, when in fact there should have been a more thorough product/service certification process, and if required, issue/change management process.


Processes have the ability to serve you well, if they are created appropriately, documented correctly, used by the right people, in the right environment at the right time. Beware, processes will not be able to cope with all scenarios that you may encounter, can be a self-imposed limiter in other environments, or take you down the wrong route in other cases. Knowing when to apply them, when to modify them, when not to use them, or when to create new ones and remove the old ones, is vital, but very few organisations have the skills, experience or nerve to independently evaluate the effectiveness, performance and efficiency of their processes. When your main management tool is the 'process hammer' all your issues start to look like nails.



Dr Karl Phillips

Ever wondered what the top 5 percent of your achievers routinely do?

Typically, 18% of your workforce is actively disengaged, followed by around 26% of people that are not engaged. Your results are being delivered by the 22% that are cruising, 29% that are motivated (sometimes, frequently or highly) and finally the top 5% that are reaching their true potential. What are the key elements that make people really achieve, and how do you introduce them into your organisation?

 +44 (0) 7468 489060



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If you would like further information on training in this or other technical topics, please contact Karl Phillips on either +44 (0) 7468 489060 or email me at: innov8orsolutions@hotmail.com