

Process Excellence Success: More Art than Science

Process excellence is becoming an umbrella phrase to describe the set of improvement methods such as Lean, Six Sigma, Lean Six Sigma, Business Process Reengineering, and technology driven BPM with the objective of improving operational performance. There has been a great of attention dedicated to the science of deploying each of these various improvement methods. Indeed, these methods of improvement have become increasingly codified and even commoditized. Much less attention has been focused on the **art** of succeeding with process excellence.

Yet, **success in process excellence is arguably more art than science.** In working with organizations over the past two decades on major process improvement projects, I've observed that the majority of challenges have to do with factors such as lack of committed leadership, shifting priorities, inconsistent communication, lack of prompt action in removing obstacles to change and a failure to recognize and celebrate accomplishments. **A rigorous methodology may help in mitigating these challenges, but the art of deploying process excellence is even more important.**

Regardless of the selected method of process improvement, success involves at least the following five generic activities:

1. Choose where to focus improvement efforts
2. Set clear goals
3. Monitor progress in analysis and design
4. Implement
5. Institutionalize changes

This article will address how the art of process excellence applies to each of these areas.

Focusing improvement efforts. Organizations appear to use different methods of deciding where to focus improvement efforts. Some companies simply act to remove a point of pain. Others use a model driven approach relying on reference frameworks such as those developed by APQC or the Value Chain Group. Other companies apply methods such as Value Stream mapping.

Regardless of the method used to decide where to focus improvement efforts (the method is the science part), the art of choosing where to focus improvement efforts involves making decisions on the following three factors. It's important to choose a project with high visibility, where the benefits are significant and the odds of success are high. It's essential to assure that the leaders of the departments touched by the selected process actively commit to the improvement effort. It's also critical to estimate the organization's capacity to absorb change. Doing this is more art than science.

Setting clear goals. All improvement projects need to be goal driven. There are methods to assure that project goals are observable and measurable. Setting goals that are both achievable and yet aggressive is as much an art as it is a science. So is the selection of the very best people to participate on the project team, crafting a compelling case for change and the creation of broad based communication of program and project goals to inform and engage the organization.

Monitoring progress. Each of the various improvement approaches has a method to monitor progress. Some rely on a champion and others use steering teams. The typical milestones for review occur at the end of an analysis phase, then at the end of a design phase, and throughout implementation. However, there are elements in monitoring project progress that are as much art as science. The right pacing to maintain momentum is one of these. Taking prompt action to capture quick wins is another as is the set of actions needed to continue to engage leadership throughout and avoid shifting priorities.

Implementation. The method for managing a project from design through to successful implementation has been thoroughly codified. Education and certification in the methods and standards are widely available. The field of change management is gradually evolving with education on standards and methods. So why is it that so many organizations fail to deliver projects on time and on budget? Many companies have not yet mastered the art of breaking down mega projects into ones of smaller size, complexity and duration. Nor have they mastered the art of removing obstacles to change, and they only periodically remember to recognize and celebrate accomplishments. These essential tactics require the regular and active engagement of the leadership team who act collectively to achieve a common goal.

Institutionalization. Institutionalizing process change for sustained performance improvement is where the rubber hits the road. There is ample room here not only for better, more broadly and uniformly understood methods as well as a greater appreciation of the subtle art in sustaining the benefits of process change. Assuring that customer focused metrics become part of leadership's scorecard, aligning rewards and recognition systems with desired value creating outcomes, establishing the needed governance for sustained attention to process, and shifting organization culture such that managers stress the management of the interaction of their unit with other units within and outside the company are just a few of the critical elements in this transformational effort.

In 1993, Hammer and Champy wrote in *Reengineering the Corporation* that "The technical problems are the easy problems... ***the soft stuff is the hard stuff.***" Major advances in technology and in various process improvement methods have been made since then, but we have made **much less progress in the art of process excellence.** The proliferation and codification of the various improvement methods and those process improvement professionals, who have emphasized methods over results, are partly to blame.

The art of process excellence is learned mainly through experience and experimentation. Readers are invited to contact the author for practical guidance related to their specific situation.

Andrew Spanyi's work in Process Management is recognized internationally. He has written three books emphasizing the importance of cross functional collaboration and a customer oriented, process focus. See: *More for Less: The Power of Process Management*, *Business Process Management is a Team Sport: Play It to Win!* and *Operational Leadership*. He has over two decades of management training and consulting experience and has delivered keynote speeches at conferences in Canada, the USA, Europe, Australia and Africa. He is an editorial board member with the BPMInstitute. To contact Andrew Spanyi visit www.spanyi.com or write to [andrew\(at\)spanyi.com](mailto:andrew(at)spanyi.com)

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