

Is It Necessary to Chart a Process in Order to Improve It?

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When doing process improvement, should we carefully document the current method and study it to find opportunities for improvement? Or, should we distance ourselves from the current process and develop a wholly new process? There are rationales supporting both approaches.

Those who favor documenting the current methods tend to be concerned that they not lose the advantages that have been built into their processes previously. They also wish to avoid repeating some of the failures of the past. They accept a logic that is based on learning from the past and reaching new heights by modifying what they have learned with each effort taking them a little farther. Their focus is on continuous improvement. Continuity (from one method to the next) is a fundamental part of continuous improvement.

Those who favor discarding the current methods and starting with a clean slate tend to see current methods as constantly deteriorating. From time to time processes become so inadequate that there is hardly anything worth preserving. As processes become cumbersome and outdated it seems appropriate to simply set them aside and start over, with another clean simple process.

Veteran operating level employees tend to favor continuous improvement over the clean slate. It enables them to keep those parts of a process that are working well while fixing those parts that aren't, which makes abundant good sense to them.

Unlike the veterans, new employees tend to favor a clean slate. It serves their career interests. They have no personal investment in the current methods, while the experience that the veterans have with the current methods gives them an advantage. However, if the current methods were to be discarded in favor of new ones it would wipe out some of that advantage. Simultaneously, if the new employees were to embrace the new methods and perhaps learn important parts of those methods to the extent that they became responsible for those parts, they might ride past those more experienced employees on the coattails of change.

When the clean slate approach is used, it tends to align the veteran employees against the new employees, with the newcomers enthusiastic for change and the

veterans using their know-how to discredit weak points in new methods. It is not at all uncommon for veterans to actually continue to use the previous methods, after a new method has been installed, in order to get the work done while simultaneously going through the motions with the new process in order to please management. And, to the extent that this is perceived as resistance to change rather than taking responsibility for getting the work done, it can lead senior management into adopting a harsh, fatalistic management philosophy that pushes out old employees each time processes are revised.

But, why would senior managers become so locked into the notion of a clean slate that they would accept personnel turnover as a natural part of process improvement. This tends to grow out of the basic nature of processes and how they mesh with the authority structure of organizations.

Processes flow across unit/section/departmental boundaries. People within each work group lack the authority to make changes in their methods that would affect the work in other groups. But, the conditions affecting the work change continuously. As the conditions change, veterans in the operating units are forced to make piecemeal changes to meet the demands of the new conditions without altering the form of the information that they pass on to the other groups. Meanwhile, managers with sufficient authority to make process-wide changes lack the detailed experience that is needed to do this on a regular basis. They simply cannot step in and fix a process each time conditions call for some minor adjustment. So piecemeal changes accumulate.

As the piecemeal changes accumulate, the processes become increasingly cumbersome. When this gets bad enough, they are kicked upstairs where there is authority sufficient to change the entire process. Each time this happens it presents a picture to senior management of the inability of their operating people to affectively adapt to change. To the extent that they attribute this problem to the people rather than to the limitations of authority at the operating level it tends to discredit the value of the experience of the veterans. Operating level experience is even perceived as an impediment to change. Veterans appear to be locked into current methods and this provides some measure of justification for putting new people in place who will make the new process work.

Furthermore, because senior managers view processes from a distance they are unaware of much of the detail and as a result, processes generally appear to be pretty simple. This apparent simplicity reinforces notions that discredit the veterans' experience. All this tends to make a clean slate approach and a sweep

seem through the work area seem attractive. "How complicated can it be? We'll just bring in some outside consultants with fresh eyes to design a clean simple process and we'll put in new employees who will buy into it."

Unfortunately, these notions describe some rather petty behaviors and certainly not the stuff of which outstanding organizations are made. In my experience, I have found that most highly experienced veterans have no problem acknowledging the deficiencies of their current processes. They are readily willing to participate in honing those processes on a continuous basis and, when necessary, totally reorganizing those processes. In fact, given a chance to step back from their work and view it with the objectivity of a detailed process chart, I have seen them exhibit very fresh eyes. And, giving fresh eyes to people who have years of appropriate experience provides a combination that is far more valuable to improvement than fresh eyes without the relevant local experience.

The key to using the experience of operating employees is twofold. First we must address the basic 'interdepartmental' nature of processes and form teams of veterans whose experience covers the entire process - but forming a team is not enough by itself. Second, we must provide the team with a detailed chart of the process that enables them to work together on the entire process while stepping back from it and viewing it in a form that is different from the way they work with it every day. This gives them a fresh perspective and fresh eyes. As they work, step by step, through the detailed process charts, they apply those fresh eyes and their experience simultaneously and they come up with modifications that are every bit as fresh and new as those produced through the clean slate approach but different in one major way, **THEY WILL WORK**. And, the reason they will work is because they are created with a full grasp of how each change will impact the entire process.

So, do we need detailed process charts? In my experience, the overwhelming weight of evidence says we do. Without them it is very difficult to make partial changes to a process and organizations drift into cycles of clean slate revisions painfully imposed by senior management. Each revision of a process generates a severe shock to the organization, which tends to discourage revisiting the process. Then uncoordinated, piecemeal changes accumulate and eventually the cycle repeats itself.

Instead we should be revisiting our processes on a regular basis. A current process chart is printed out from the process chart library and a team reviews it. When they find that changes have occurred or are needed they modify the chart

and implement those changes that are new. That is how continuous improvement works.

By doing this, we treat our employees with respect. We not only show respect for their current experience, we also show respect for their ability to apply that experience in a way that creates better processes and better experience. When we do this well, people tend to rise to the challenge. Treated with respect they tend to earn it. We bring out the best in our people.

Compare this with organizations that periodically treat their veteran employees with disrespect. This encourages them look out for themselves. To the extent that the best employees are the most marketable, we establish a force that periodically purges the organization of its best employees. They choose to leave. Meanwhile we turn the weaker employees into sullen, disgruntled people with little company loyalty, going through the motions, doing what they are told to do whether it makes sense or not.

Finally, there is a benefit to using charts with interoffice teams that helps to reconcile the natural differences between the veteran employees and that new ones. While the charts serve to capture the valuable experience of the veterans and turn it into continuously improving processes they also serve as an outstanding tool for speeding up the rate at which the newcomers develop effective understandings of their work.

And, it is a genuine plus for an organization to be able to periodically put together teams consisting of the master veterans along with a few newcomers. These teams work together to do something of keen value for their organization and in doing so they get to know one another at their best, a situation that encourages respect. Furthermore, as they see the results of their efforts incorporated into the ever improving operations of their organization they build solid personal identity with the organization. It becomes their organization.

Conclusion – The clean slate approach (improvement without studying the current methods) discredits current experience, tends to divide employees along lines of seniority and abandons the long term effort at continuous improvement. Detailed process charts organized in a process chart library enable continuous improvement while providing a vehicle for employees to work creatively together building better processes and interpersonal respect. This improves the skills of the new employees while capturing and advancing the experience of the veterans.

About the Author

Dr. Graham is a recognized authority on process improvement, he is a Fellow (the highest membership category) of the Institute of Industrial Engineers. He has received the Jo Warner award, the highest award of the Business Forms Management Association and he received a Commissioner's Citation for his work with the Bureau of Drugs (rarely awarded to a non employee). He has also been recognized with the President's Award and the Mogensen Bronze, the two highest awards of the Improvement Institute. Dr. Graham has four University degrees, a BA Magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in Business Administration from Ohio Wesleyan, a BFA in Studio Art with honors from Ohio Wesleyan, an MBA in Production Management from UCLA and a PhD in Behavioral Science with distinction from UCLA. His career, like his education, balances excellence in technique with years of development of people skills. On the technical side he has continuously improved the techniques of Process Charting, Process Analysis, Design and Analysis of Forms (both paper and electronic), Project Management, Implementation technique, Benefit and Cost analysis, etc. On the human side he has continuously improved the methodologies for guiding teams through complex improvements. He conducted his first process improvement workshop in 1960 and has continued to conduct workshops ever since. He guided improvement projects and assisted companies in building continuous improvement programs for over 40 years.

He is the Chairman of the Ben Graham Group of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Ben Graham Latin America and The Ben Graham Corporation of Tipp City, Ohio. The Ben Graham Corporation pioneered the field of business process improvement, and has provided process improvement consulting, coaching and education services to organizations across North America since 1953. It also publishes Graham Process Mapping Software, which is designed specifically and solely for preparing detail process maps. More information about the software is available at <http://www.processchart.com>