

Capturing Reality: Preparing for Successful Process Improvement

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An integral and often overlooked step in improvement work is the preparation work: defining the project and gathering the facts that are essential to gaining a good understanding of the existing process. Too often this initial phase of a project is given cursory attention or ignored altogether. This is the first in a series of papers dealing with the up-front work in process improvement projects.

Setting up the project

Select a process to study. A process is a series of steps that are completed to accomplish a particular result. The result is what our business is interested in (hopefully); the process is what we do to get it. Sometimes a process begs for review...When it takes too long to achieve the result, when there are complaints about the result, when there are errors in the result...these are all things that point us in the direction of a particular process to study. However, problems aren't a prerequisite. Any process can be studied and improved.

Identify your objectives. Sometimes the objectives are obvious. If there are too many errors, we want to reduce the number of errors. If the process takes too long, we want to get through it faster. Whatever the objectives, it seems that reducing cycle time is always included. Sometimes the objective is simply to document the process -- so people can understand it better, to meet regulatory or certification requirements, to satisfy an audit...

Identify the process start point. What is it that triggers the process? Is it the receipt of an application, an email request, an order form, a phone call or are there several triggers?

Identify the process endpoint. How far will you follow this process? Until the application is approved, the product has shipped, the product has been received, a notification email has been sent?

Identify WHERE the work occurs. The best way of doing this is to let the process tell you. Walk the path of the process (perhaps make a couple of phone calls – keep in mind, this isn't the time to gather details...you just want to know where the work is).

Identify WHO does the work. When you know where the work is, the area supervisors can tell you WHO the most experienced employees are ...the folks they just can't spare

for “another project”. These are the people that you need to work with. (It is more important that they are available for analysis, but getting them involved up front and familiar with the process maps early on will only help.) It is far better to spend a little time with someone who really knows the work than a lot of time with someone who doesn't.

Get the support of the executive whose area of control spans the process. With a well-defined project that includes the items we just worked through, this should not be an issue. This executive's role in the fact gathering phase of the project is limited but essential and, in fact, determines whether to proceed or not. They need to demonstrate buy-in to the project, signing off on a Project Agreement / Description / Charter and giving the project facilitator the okay to move forward. They demonstrate support and outline expectations in the form of a public announcement. More on that next time.

Ben B Graham is President of The Ben Graham Corporation and author of the book 'Detail Process Charting: Speaking the Language of Process' published by John Wiley Publishers. His company pioneered the field of business process improvement, and has provided process improvement consulting, coaching and education services to organizations across North America since 1953. Ben has worked with many organizations to build libraries of business process maps and develop effective, process-focused, continuous improvement programs. His organization publishes Graham Process Mapping Software, which is designed specifically and solely for preparing detail process maps.