

Reliable Processes Optimize Quality, Cost, and Speed

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How many times have you cut corners to save time or money, only to regret the problems associated with the resulting error or quality defect? It happens far too often!

Quality, cost, and speed are perpetually in conflict. Nobody realizes that more than a Project Manager. Though your career may have never included that job title, you've certainly managed projects. Every project has desired outcomes that include a projected completion date, a constraint on costs, and expectations around the ability of the project to achieve its intended purpose.

In managing a project, you gain valuable experience in coordinating people and managing processes. Ah, processes. Projects have processes and so do ongoing organizations. I find, however, that too many leaders don't sufficiently understand the value of emphasizing reliable processes.

Let me explain. All work is a process. We often erroneously think of work as a single activity. Maybe that's because we routinely generate "to-do" lists, compilations of activities we need to accomplish. What we actually want, however, are the results that the activities deliver. In today's complex world, rarely does a single activity produce the desired result.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) administers the certification of an individual as a PMP, a Project Management Professional. *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* is the collection of insights and practices upon which the PMI bases its certification process for conferring the PMP designation.

The *PMBOK Guide* defines "process" as "a series of actions bringing about a result." The *Guide* goes on to specify five different groups of processes encountered in managing projects: initiating processes, planning processes, executing processes, controlling processes, and closing processes.

Throughout all five groups of process activities, Project Managers are deeply aware of the perpetual conflict among quality, cost, and speed. The best Project Managers can keep their attention on all three at once. Many of us, however, attend to the one that happens currently to be most significantly out of control. We put our time and energy into what seems to be the problem of the moment.

Why make such a big deal about Project Managers and processes? Because the organization you lead survives on processes, and you manage quality and cost, often under urgent time pressures.

My purpose in this article is to highlight that you can expect that speed, reduced cost, and improved quality will continually compete for your attention. To optimize all three, stress to your organization the importance of intentionally seeking to improve your organizational processes.

Let me offer two examples. Your buyer goes on vacation. The replacement person orders a supply of resin from a cheaper supplier. Three months later, your customer complaints tripled. A critical plastic part has suddenly started breaking. Quality suffered from an honorable intent to save money.

A new employee, a graduate from a top engineering school, seems to deliver work laden with simple errors. After a few months of kicking back his work, you do some investigation. You learn he grew up relying on computers, never checking the viability of the numbers he enters. He doesn't recognize when the numbers make no sense, so he just passes them along, presuming he is doing good work!

You can unfortunately recount similar examples within your own organization. So, what do you do? In the short term, educate your team members that when attempting to reduce costs, improve quality, or save time, be on the lookout for potential negative effects on the other two measures.

For the longer term, emphasize the importance of generating, documenting, and executing reliable processes. When you have a problem, go beyond just correcting it. Use the incident to improve and update your documented process, reducing the probability of that problem occurring again!