

The Importance of “Process Management”

Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the Savannah *Business Journal* on Monday, December 21, 2009

I routinely invite leaders to consider ways they might improve their organizations. Sometimes they look at me as if I'm crazy. They lament, “I can't even keep up with the real work required of us every day! How do you expect me to embark on an improvement process?”

When leaders talk about their “real work,” they usually are talking about their operations, the systematic procedures by which they generate their products or services. The collection of practices used to maintain and improve these sequential activities is called “process management.”

Process management is a leadership skill. When I invite leaders to assess themselves in the many attributes of leadership, “process management” is one of the characteristics they evaluate. Here is the description of someone skilled in process management provided in the assessment instrument I use:

- good at figuring out the processes necessary to get things done;
- knows how to organize people and activities;
- understands how to separate and combine tasks into efficient work flow;
- knows what to measure and how to measure it;
- can see opportunities for synergy and integration where others can't;
- can simplify complex processes;
- gets more results out of fewer resources.

One of the ways I recommend leaders find time to focus on improving their organization is by routinizing their operations. Reliable, repeatable systems yield predictable outcomes with minimum variation and error. If individuals can reduce rework, they will have more time to focus on improvement opportunities.

If a written, step-by-step description of the operation does not already exist, I strongly encourage my clients to make the time to generate one. This usually isn't a single document. As soon as a worker begins to describe the process, it becomes clear that there are dozens of independent and interrelated procedures required to accomplish just about any task.

Is it worth the time to write all that down? You bet! Just imagine in your operation if a key individual were involved tomorrow in a severe, debilitating car accident. Or think about being asked to release a competent, responsible contributor to fill a new responsibility. How quickly would such an individual be able to transfer all the knowledge packed into his or her brain?

For many reasons, it is very desirable to have your operations documented and recorded. Many organizations today are seeking certification consistent with the ISO-9000 standard. To obtain that designation requires an explicit step-by-step description, and your operations are audited annually to assure that your process description is current and that you follow it.

I can guarantee that as soon as someone starts to prepare a written description, ideas for improving the operation start to flow! However, I suggest that you NOT document what you **want the process to be**, but that you document **what the process truly is now**.

Your effort to clarify and improve works best, ironically, if you separate the steps. First, record what currently happens. Then look for where errors occur, where backlogs accumulate, and where simplification, and waste or cost reduction are possible.

Some leaders are very excited when they become aware of the benefits of working “on” their systems. It's so easy to get trapped working “in” your systems, daily grinding out what you or someone else put into place long ago. When leaders give themselves freedom to question the various methods and techniques used to accomplish their organization's operations, their enthusiasm and creativity can pop to new levels.

One additional piece of counsel is that you do not attempt documenting your processes on your own; involve the people who do the work. You'll ultimately want to make improvements, and they'll be able to help you consider what negative side effects might occur when you make changes. Further, since they are the ones who will daily implement the new procedures, their buy-in is essential. No matter how wonderful the change looks on paper, it won't succeed if the people doing the work aren't convinced it's a genuine upgrade. Their engagement occurs best when they are involved in designing the improvements. (Please read my article entitled "Leaders and a Lost Opportunity--Collaboration.")

Want to know more about process management? Contact me, or better yet, do some research online. One source of information I strongly advocate for leaders serious about improvement is the "Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award," named in honor of the Secretary of Commerce when the award and its initial criteria were adopted in 1987. Go to nist.gov/baldrige/how-baldrige-works.

There are seven categories in the award criteria. One of them is "operations" which refers to the organization's operational processes and how they are managed and improved. Of the seven categories, the first six categories are called "process categories" because each of them focuses on a different set of methods by which the organization achieves its results. "Results" is the seventh category.

Six of the seven categories of excellence criteria focusing on "processes" should give you a sense of the importance of "process management" in contributing to the organization's effectiveness!

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach, helping organizations build future leaders and improve processes. Contact Dennis at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com. Call him with your questions at (404)-575-3050.