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The Keys to Implementing Business Process Improvement To Drive Bottom Line Results

Business process improvement has almost become a "buzzword" - sounds good but what does it mean? What is really accomplished? Many times, companies create volumes of 1-inch thick binders of best practice processes, and yet achieve no bottom line results. Anyone seen these binders collecting dust on the bookshelf? If they were providing value, wouldn't the employees use them?

So, how do you beat the odds and implement a business process improvement process that will drive bottom line results? People.

First, it is critical to involve employees in the process from the start. The employees who perform the business processes which are being reviewed/ discussed should be the "stars" of the business process improvement initiative, and the leaders should be in a supporting role - after all, who knows the processes best? And, who will have the best ideas on how to improve upon what they do each day? The leaders who truly value their employee's input and ideas and who can ask questions that help facilitate this process will far exceed their competition.

Second, it is important to value diversity of ideas. In one company I worked with, the most significant bottom line business results were generated through a spirited debate. There were divergent views (one division valued processes and procedures and the other division valued creativity and spontaneity); however, by engaging in a spirited debate, they were able to take the best of both worlds to create an optimal solution - one that delivered bottom line results in terms of dollars and customer service.

Third, the plan-do-check-act model provides a solid foundation for implementing the business processes so that the dust-collecting books turn into living processes. This model is as it sounds. Plan it, do it, check it (verify that the new processes accomplish what is intended), and act (standardize the process, continually improve it, etc). And, to circle around to the first priority again - the employees are integral to the success of this model. Leaders provide the vision, resources and support. The employees lead the process improvement.

The latest trends, programs and technology might be exciting; however, they are not what will drive results. People drive bottom line results.

Lisa's Tips - March's Topic - Leadership

1. Ask questions: Instead of talking, think of a provocative question and listen. By mastering the art of asking questions, you can help people learn and build confidence since they are developing their own answers, ideas, plans, etc.
2. Celebrate mistakes; however, not trends of mistakes: Society typically penalizes mistakes. For example, students lose grade points for mistakes. However, mistakes are how we learn. If you never make mistakes, you are not

taking enough risk.

3. Do what you say you'll do. This sounds obvious; however, I've found it is much harder to implement than it seems and is rarely found in leadership. Do not over commit. No matter how insignificant it seems to the leader, it will be a significant event to the employees if the leader does not follow through on his/her promises.
4. Follow up but do not micromanage. There is a distinct difference between following up with employees on progress towards goals, roadblocks, and asking how you can support them and micromanaging every detailed task. Follow up is geared to achieving results and micromanaging is geared towards monitoring the tasks (regardless of the results).
5. Communicate, communicate, and communicate. Just when you think you've repeated yourself too many times, repeat it again (with different examples, stories, etc). Communication is the key to success - providing clarity, vision, feedback, celebrating successes, etc.

Recommended Reading

Execution by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan - it is an interesting read on the importance of execution (for example, an alarming statistic on weak execution: in the year 2000, 40 CEO's of the top 200 companies on the Fortune 500 list were removed - 20%). And, I thought it did an excellent job of conveying that the keys to execution are not the ones I've typically heard discussed in companies (using the latest technology, programs etc such as lean); instead, it boils down to people and fundamentals.

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