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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: Project Management

1. Form a team: Although this seems obvious, it is rarely achieved. The definition of a team is a group of people working together with a common goal. If one person on a team can succeed while the others fail, it is not a team.
2. Estimate the time to complete tasks aggressively: This might seem counterintuitive to those that want to make sure they are successful (accomplish tasks on time). However, for example, if you have 30 tasks and every person adds a cushion to their task time, is it possible the project could take 4 or 10 times longer than it should?

Sure. And, if you have 5 days to complete a task that could be completed in 1 day, does the extra time yield better results? No. I've found that people usually start working on the task on day 4. Instead, it is important to make reasonable estimates of time and stick to them. Why is this important to larger topics such as profit/competitiveness? As an example, let's assume that you are on a project team to reduce lead-time to customers from 10 days to 5 days, and that your competition delivers in 6 days. Do you think it will make a difference if this project is completed in 3 months vs. a year?

3. Critical path: It is easy to get buried in the details of a million tasks within a project plan. Instead, find out which tasks are on the critical path (they must be completed before another task can begin and it is a task that is required for the project to be considered a success). Typically, it will be a small fraction of the total tasks. Then, as a project leader, focus and follow up on only those tasks.
4. Celebrate "small wins": Don't wait for the end of the project. Celebrate successes along the way, especially those on the critical path. This will help keep the team focused and working as a team.

Recommended Reading

["The Carolina Way: Leadership Lessons from a Life in Coaching"](#) by Dean Smith and Gerald D. Bell - since I'm an alumni of Carolina, of course, I consider it a classic. However, regardless of your school choice, it provides several coaching lessons, which can be directly applied to the business world in an easy-to-read format with real-life examples for easy application. For anyone interested in improving upon leadership skills, you'll be able to find at least a few "tips and tricks" to help.

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