Why Do Process Improvement Efforts Fail?

Business processes are always a work in progress. Process improvement goes on all the time, typically small-scale tinkering within a business unit or a work team that may or may not have lasting operational impact. Large-scale process improvement efforts, on the other hand, represent significant investments of organizational attention and resources, and are generally undertaken in the expectation of significant returns. They also represent a corresponding risk; and unfortunately, they often do fail. The anticipated improvement may not be actually implemented at all, or completely, or effectively; it may be tried and abandoned; it may not make it out of development in the first place; or, worst of all, it goes live and turns out to be a disaster.

Every organization is different, and so are the circumstances of every improvement effort. The causes of failure, however, are rarely unique. By understanding some of the common reasons process improvement efforts fail, you can take steps to avoid those pitfalls and improve the odds of your project reaching its goals successfully.

Vision & Buy-In

A process improvement effort is supposed to accomplish *something*. Who knows what it is? Who wants it? And who doesn't? Lack of effective buy-in, especially by senior management, and disagreement about what the initiative is meant to achieve, are critical problems that can doom a project from the outset.

- Does the effort have a clear objective and scope that everyone agrees on? Lack of agreement by all the stakeholders regarding what precisely the project is intended to achieve can be a major pitfall.
  - If stakeholders have different understandings of what the real goal of the project may be, or how it may impact their area, their expectations may set them up for opposition and frustration later on when the reality of the project turns out to be different than they thought. The project may not actually address what they consider critical issues; or it may disrupt the status quo in ways they find upsetting.
  - Air and clarify misunderstandings as quickly as possible. This may take some effort—if people think they're talking about the same thing, it may be difficult to recognize they're really not. Make sure you have a project charter that is as detailed and explicit about scope and objectives as possible, and discuss it in depth with everyone involved.
- If stakeholders understand what the project is supposed to do but do not see any benefit to changing the current practice ("*if it ain't broke, don't fix it*"), they may actively oppose the effort or work to undermine or sabotage it.
  - Identify the opposition early. It may be possible for you to persuade them they really do stand to benefit from a successful project, or at least won't suffer from it. If you can't turn them into active or passive supporters, you may have to work then to neutralize them as opponents and shore up your project's base of support. Make sure your project has effective allies and champions in management, or else you're sunk.

Resources

Other people factors are also implicated in many process improvement failures.

- Are the people needed to support the effort able to commit sufficient time and attention to the project, or do their day-to-day operational responsibilities leave them too little capacity to do the work you need from them? If they can't be freed from their "day job" to help your improvement initiative, what alternatives exist? If necessary, you may be able to delay your work till they are more available. Or there may be someone else in the organization with the skills or background you require and more available capacity.
- Does staff have the skills to perform the improved process? Training is an essential part of most change projects. Make sure you build it in with sufficient robustness to ensure people are able to do what they need to when the time comes without excessive frustration or difficulty. Don't rush it: that way lies an avoidable disaster!