Classifying Different Process Types – Part One

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When something works for you, it's very hard to consider using something else. If that's true in life, it certainly works for consulting. Most consultants have a "one-size-fits-all" approach to process improvement. And in the sales pitch: surprise, surprise that just happens to be the right methodology to fix your processes. But the fact is that not all process types benefit from the same approach to improvement. That's because not all processes are the same. When you dig below the surface, different processes have different characteristics. So let's take a look at how to classify processes to help you choose the right approach to improving them. This is a pretty big subject so I am going to break it into a three-part article. This is part one.I find it useful to classify processes using a couple of key indicators. It's not the only way to do this, but it works pretty well most of the time. So here are the two parameters.

Process Types – Frequency

The first is frequency. How often do you run the process? Is it a few times a year or is it many times in a day? Think about the cabin crew in a commercial aircraft. They have processes they must follow for reasons of both efficiency and compliance with federal regulations. There are 1000's of commercial flights every day. And each time the cabin crew follows the same process to get the aircraft ready to fly safely, including that speech about putting on a life vest. The one we all ignore. I'd call that a pretty frequently used process. On the other hand hiring a senior executive for your company should be pretty rare.

Process Types – Predictability

The second parameter is predictability – to what degree can the activities and their sequence be planned in advance? I know someone who does the IT for an arts organization that runs several major venues for concerts and performances. One of his jobs is to set up the IT for each incoming performer or theater company. Now, for him, that happens about 120 times a year. The thing is that they all have different IT needs. He can never predict what the performers will require. He has tried to create a standard

needed to deliver them are so unpredictable.

Combined Process Types

Typically in any organization, you will find a mix of processes with varying degrees of frequency and predictability. Why do these parameters, matter? Well, because together, they determine the right approach to use.

So, let's plot theses two parameters against each other. On one axis, let's measure predictability. And let's say high and low. And on the other axis, let's measure frequency, again high and low.

OK. Look at the quadrant defined by high predictability and high frequency. That's the equivalent of the assembly line in action. This is where we find that the classic process improvement methods work the best. And that's quite understandable since most process improvement methods originated in manufacturing. So, if you have a process which has a standard outcome and you run it frequently, like, say a bank opening an account for a new customer, then, by all means, use the standard techniques of process improvement. But what if the process is not in this quadrant?

In the next article, we are going to look at the other quadrants, what kind of processes you find in them and the right approaches to use in each one.

Classifying Process Types Series: Part One, Part Two, Part Three

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