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Successful Process Improvement

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Abstract

The complex task of managing change and assuring sustained change can be supported with simple straightforward tools. This paper describes how a combination of simple two way communication tools geared for support of four key success factors, facilitate resistance to change and support the building of sustained improvement.

Introduction

There are several models today that provide a structured approach for process improvement teams to use in their work. The SEPG approach with SEI's Ideal model Curtis et al. (1993) may be one of the best known. Although these formal models provide an excellent framework for the work of process improvement teams there are other human and soft factors that must be taken into consideration in order to establish sustainable change within the organisation.

This paper will focus on methods and techniques to **manage the resistance to change** inherent in most humans and to **sustain change within an organisation**. This involves the understanding and management of such factors as enthusiasm, persistence, buy in, commitment, fear and ignorance. The tools and techniques, which we have found to be efficient, are one by one very simple and straightforward and they are all based on using efficient two-way communication.

Establishing efficient two way communication as a means for managing change

To handle resistance and create buy-in it is important that people affected by the change are aware of the plans and purpose of the improvement effort. It is also important that their concerns and improvement suggestions are taken into consideration. Handling resistance and creating buy-in is a trust building activity towards the actual improvement where two way communications becomes the process improvement teams most important tool.

Two-way communications in itself creates a positive atmosphere and a good work environment. We have found different forms of two-way communication to be essential in breaking settled patterns and in driving the change effort to a sustainable state. Experience has shown the following four factors to be essential in successfully forming the two way communication strategy:

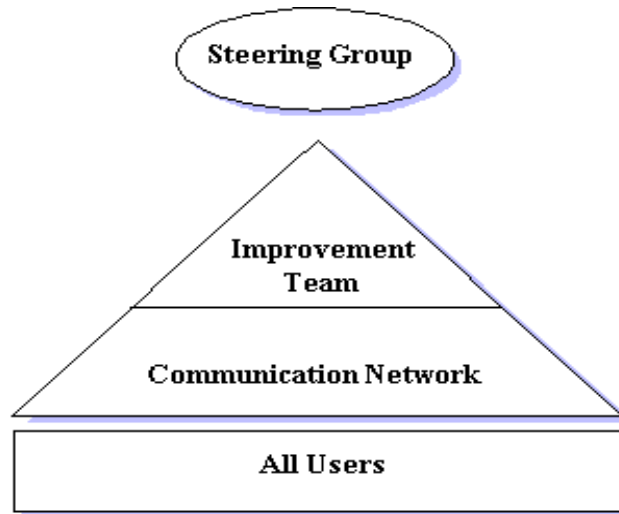
1. **Forward looking information from those in control of the improvement effort.** All affected should always be informed in advance and know what will happen. Thereby all feel involved and all feel in control.
2. **Trust building through timely and honest status information to all affected.** The sense of participation and being in control of the situation is enhanced with timely and adequate feedback. Also note that strong commitment and enthusiasm while being a success factor can be turned into a risk if there is loss of trust. Honest and timely feedback nourishes trust and eliminates the risk for backlash.
3. **Release ideas and expertise existing in the organisation.** Our experience has shown that innovative ideas and understanding of the important constraints are often found within the organisation. Detecting such ideas and insights early enhances the improvement effort.
4. **Marketing of senior management commitment to all involved.** Strong, persistent communicated commitment from senior management to the improvement effort is fundamental to

success. Not even the strongest management commitment will help if people in the organisation are unaware of it.

Continuous focus on the four critical success factors while using the ideas and tools for efficient two way communication described below is our formula for successful process improvement. In other words, keeping it simple but highly focused.

The improvement Infrastructure

It is important that an improvement infrastructure is established that assures involvement from senior management as well as access to all affected users. We have used the following model.



- **Improvement team** - The Improvement team is the operational group in the improvement effort. The team should be composed cross-organisational. I.e. all involved organisational units should feel confident that at least one of the team members understands their point of view and their concerns. The Improvement team is the driving body or the project management for the improvement effort. Apart from this, it is also the responsibility of the Improvement team, to function as the temporary owner of all processes that have been changed. This will assure that the improved process is already in use when the ownership of the process is returned to the original owner.
Management Steering Group - To establish a sustainable change the improvement effort must be co-ordinated with affected managers to assure commitment of resources, decisions and co-ordination with other improvement initiatives. An effective way to handle this is to implement a Management Steering Group for the process improvement team. The members of the Steering group should be senior level managers from affected organisational units. The responsibility of the Steering group is to push and challenge the process improvement team and to assure sufficient resources and deliveries and results with maximum benefit for the overall organisation. The process improvement team should synchronise the effort with the Steering Group on a monthly basis regarding results, costs, plans for following month and raise issues that require attention or decision from the Steering Group. It is important that the members of the Steering Group see the improvement team as their tool to create change and that they demonstrate their commitment in the organisation.

Communication network - Although information is published by the improvement team someone has to make sure that people are aware of the existing information and lobby for the ideas. This challenge increases with the size of the organisation. To cope with this a communication network with representatives from each affected organisational unit can be built. The responsibility of the network representatives is to act as change agents spreading information to people in their part of the organisation, market the improvement effort and existing information, answer questions,

review material etc. The change agents also serve as a channel for collecting feedback and metrics regarding the process performance in the organisation. The process improvement team has to assure that the change agents can commit to their role both in terms of available time and buy-in/interest in the improvement effort. To maintain a strong network and commitment the change agents must be kept up to date and routines that support teamwork within the network be established. Network meetings/workshops should be arranged on a continuous basis depending on size and scope of improvement effort and organisation.. The communication network becomes the improvement team's most important tool in assuring active involvement from all future users. The network will continue to play an important role during and after the implementation of the improvement effort in terms of coaching and exchanging best/worst practices.

Users - The involvement of all users is essential to the successful improvement program. It is important to keep track of what user have attended the roadshow and who have been given an opportunity to express ideas and concerns. It is also wise to complement the official roadshows with visits to all design sites on a regular basis.

Communication Tools

- Apart from the infrastructure we have used the following tools to strengthen the communication with all involved:
- Roadshow - A method for active information spreading and marketing is to use a road show, i.e. a tour marketing the improvement effort and people involved. The road shows (or corridor show if it is a small organisation) can be performed at several stages in the improvement effort and organised as a series of presentations where all people who will be affected by the improvement effort are invited. At the Roadshow the process improvement team can present the people involved in the improvement effort and gather feedback from the future users regarding the purpose and intended plans. The road shows provide people with a chance to ask questions, express their concerns and discuss improvement suggestions directly with the process improvement team. This decreases the build up of organisational resistance. It provides important insights from future users that may have impact on the results of the improvement effort. This type of active information spreading and information gathering assures that all affected players in the organisation receive the same information, which enhances the feeling of participation. It also gives the process improvement effort and teams a face in the organisation, which opens channels and relations for continuous communication.
- WWW - Although the road show concept is a great opportunity for creating awareness about the improvement effort, communication channels for distributing and collecting information on a continuous basis must also be established. The WWW technology is an excellent media for this. The process improvement team can create their own home page on the organisation's intranet where they can visualise goals, plans, results and show the people involved in the effort. It is important that the information displayed on the Web is kept up to date and someone in the process improvement team should be assigned to be the Web editor. A monthly Newsflash describing the latest development and recognising efforts and suggestions from other people should be included. Distributing the Newsflash in a paper format as well makes the information distribution even more active. For the homepage to support two-way communication a help desk function should be implemented where users can send in questions and suggestions. If the homepage is kept up to date and the Newsflash distributed on a continuous basis they provide a good means for the improvement team to maintain awareness in the organisation about the improvement effort and future change.

Summary

- By stressing the success factors described above the simple and straightforward ideas can be the means to turn an improvement failure into an improvement success. By keeping things simple and continuously focusing the effort where the most leverage is gained, it is our experience that even a small improvement team can achieve major change.

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