



Who Owns the Process?

Usually, no one

A process owner is appointed by management to ensure that a major cross-functional process is both effective and efficient. This is a key concept that must be understood for any process improvement strategy to work. Conventional functional management, where leaders are assigned to departments or functions, has worked well for a number of years, but it has its shortcomings. Competition within an organization, although healthy in some cases, can be self-defeating because it puts all functions in competition for limited resources. Frequently, the function that presents the best show gets the most resources, though it might not have the biggest need. In other cases, resources are allocated only to part of a critical process that's carried out by one function, but relevant needs in an interfacing function aren't addressed.

An organization that wants to succeed must stop looking at its business as many large functions and start looking at it as many integrated business processes. This allows the organization to select the process it wants to improve and obtain the maximum return on its investment. The process is the important element, and the process owner plays a critical role in making the process mesh. The process owner provides a means by which functional objectives can be met without losing sight of the larger business objective.

A process owner must be able to anticipate business changes and their effect on the process. The owner must be able to perceive what direction any new business will take and how that will affect the process.

A business process seldom improves if there is no one who feels that he or she owns it. Therefore, the first criterion for improvement must be ownership. One way to decide who feels (or should feel) the most ownership of a particular process is

to answer the following questions. Who is the person with the most:

- Resources (e.g., people, systems)?
- Work (time)?
- Pain (critiques, complaints, fire-fighting)?
- Actual or potential credit?
- Potential gain when everything works well?
- Ability to effect change?

The answers to these questions should give a fairly good idea of who's the most concerned and involved with the process. The end-user of a process might be the best owner because he or she has the most to gain from its improvement.

A second issue is that critical processes may come from different organizational levels. Therefore, the executive team must ensure that the owner has sufficient power to act on the selected process. Because many major business processes are inter-functional or even international, most organizations don't assign specific leaders to them. Consequently, the executive team must give the process owner authority and responsibility for the total process.

The business process owner should operate at a level high enough to:

- Identify the effect of new business directions on the process
- Influence changes in policies and procedures affecting the process
- Plan and implement changes
- Monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the process

A third criterion for process owner selection concerns the person's ability to lead a team. He or she should be:

- Highly credible
- Able to keep a group on schedule
- Able to lead and direct a group
- Able to support and encourage the process improvement team (PIT)

- A skilled negotiator
- Willing to embrace change
- Able to deal with higher-level management
- Able to knock down roadblocks
- Able to live up to commitments
- Able to handle poor performance

The final criterion is that the process owner should understand the process. If the owner understands the total process, it's much easier to do the job effectively, and there will be few restarts. Although this is a desirable characteristic, it isn't mandatory. As soon as the process is flowcharted, every member of the PIT will have an understanding of how the total process works. As a result, the process user, who might have little understanding of the internal workings of the process but has a significant stake in its success, can be selected as the process owner.

"In large and complex organizations like ours," says John Akers, past chairman of IBM, "the need is especially great for managers to 'own' that process."

Yes, John, that's true, and it's also true for small- and medium-size businesses. They, too, must have managers and employees who feel that they own the processes in which they're involved.

About the author

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