

Encouraging Process Improvement

By Bill Flury

Introduction

You would think that something that includes “improvement” in the title is good and everyone should be in favor of it. However, it doesn’t always play out that way. There are people who just don’t see any need to improve what they are doing and lack any motivation to spend any time or effort doing it. Trying to force people with this attitude into a process improvement program almost always fails.

Let’s look at the different types of attitudes that lead to lack of motivation for process improvement. Later, we will address how to change these attitudes from negative to positive.

We’ll start with examining the attitudes of the workers who have no interest in process improvement. There are several factors that combine to shape their lack of interest in improvement. Let’s listen to them and hear what they say about their work.

Part 1: Lack of Motivation for Process Improvement

“We’re Doing Fine.”

Ask these workers about doing something to improve their processes and they say, “We’re doing fine. Don’t bother us with that stuff. Sure, we have mix-ups, make mistakes, and deliver our products late or with errors, but none of that is a problem for us or the company.” So, why don’t they care about that? Why doesn’t all of that give them headaches?

How can they feel that they are “fine” and don’t need to improve the way they work? Read on.



“It’s Not Really a Process.”

These workers are software maintenance programmers. The type of work they do is similar to what auto mechanics do. All the jobs appear to be different and, in fact they are. However, the process that they follow in attacking each job and making the changes always includes the same kinds of tasks: analyze the problem; devise a change; write the “fix”; test the fix; deliver the change and adjust the documentation. It really is a process but they can’t see that. There is enough similarity in those jobs to make it possible to do them better, cheaper and faster – if one really wanted to. But, why? And, where would you start?

“We Get Paid for All the Hours We Work.”

The workers involved in this process develop, test and deliver software changes to a government IT system. They work under the terms of a services contract. They, and their company, get paid for all of the hours they work. That includes any time for extra work or rework before or after they deliver their products. It also includes payment for overtime when that is needed. In some contracts of this type there is premium pay for overtime and that is an incentive to create a need for it.

“There’s No Personal Competition to Beat.”

The workers have somewhat rare skills. They have had long-term experience with their client’s IT system. They feel secure because it would be difficult for their client to replace them without a major disruption in their operations. The client cannot do the work with internal staff so the client is quite tolerant of mistakes, errors and late deliveries.

“Why Work Faster, Better or Cheaper?”

There’s never a deadline. The client’s IT system has been in place for a long time and will continue for a long time to come. Changes are needed at a fairly steady rate and it is extremely rare to have a requirement to make a change by a certain date. When that does occur, other changes get deferred so the workload stays steady. Improved response time has no value.

“Nobody Cares.”

The work allows little opportunity for recognition. With no regular measurement of performance, management has no way to recognize and reward good performance. The workers get their psychic income from their peers. They know who the “best” is and that’s enough for them.

“Why Bother?”

From the workers’ standpoint, what’s to improve? They work at a pace that suits them and get paid for every hour they work. They get paid for good work or bad. If they have to work overtime (for any reason) they get a premium. Their management is not concerned about the pace of their work because they can bill for every hour – and more is better. The client tolerates this because they have no other options.

They’re “fine”. But, are they, really? What if the company loses its permissive client and has to compete for work with one that is really concerned about cost, schedule and technical performance? On a personal level, what if the company can’t compete and the workers need to find other jobs? What will they have to show for their past performance? Maybe they should care.

Now, let’s listen to the Managers and hear why they are not interested.

“It’s Not Required.”

There are managers who stick closely to their work orders and contract terms. They have their work groups do only what is specified, nothing more or less. They will do process improvement only if it is required in their contract.

“We’re Doing Fine.”

These managers are meeting their cost, schedule and performance goals and can prove that. In their minds, they are doing fine. [Dirty little secret: They are not counting the uncompensated overtime for rework and recovery from schedule slips and cost overruns. So, they really don’t know how “UN-fine” they are.]

“We Just Sell Hours – Not Performance.”

Few managers collect meaningful data on productivity or performance. With no meaningful data on either of these, it is hard to perceive how working differently (better) would make the company more competitive. Competition has to be on cost alone. No case can be made for productivity per hour. The company is just selling hours – good or bad, all hours are the same price. The only way they can improve on the hourly rate is to hire cheaper people and that’s not process improvement.

“It’s Too Complicated and Costs Too Much.”

Unfortunately, the jargon and complexity of formal process improvement programs are hard to understand and tend to confuse people. Process improvement consultants stress rigor and company managers often overreact to the advice. This leads them to misperceive and vastly

overestimate the cost of putting a formal program into action. Already unaware and leery of the potential benefits, company managers approach the process improvement programs with great concern. Without being required to do such a program, few can be convinced of the value.

Part 2: Creating Motivation for Process Improvement

Effective process improvement programs have been shown to yield many benefits on both a personal and an organizational level. In order to motivate people to participate actively in a process improvement program you need to make sure everyone is aware of and fully comprehends the benefits to themselves and to their organization. However, the benefits are subtle and need to be revealed and explained to those who presently perceive no value. Without that, they will treat any proposed “improvement” program like bad tasting medicine. They will do their best to avoid the things they need to do to make it work.

How to Change Attitudes Regarding Process Improvement

Getting a process improvement program into operation and working well is not easy. You have to overcome some inertia – the feeling that “We’re fine, why should we change what we’re doing?” Well, there are some ways. Let’s assume that you are the person who volunteered to accept this leadership challenge. To succeed you will need to turn all of the negative feelings of the work group into positive feelings for process improvement. Our recommended approach for doing this can be summarized as Reveal, Appeal, and Deal. You should approach these in that order.

Reveal the Process

The biggest hurdle for you to overcome is the unjustified feeling that “what we are doing is not a process.” You really do have a process. Your process is what you do. The problem is that, while everyone thinks they know what they do and how they interact with the others in their work group, there is no description of the process that everyone can see. Thus, your first task is to reveal the process so that all can see a complete picture of it.

You need to gather the folks who are doing similar types of work and get them to explain to each other their personal process for doing what they do. As they explain what they do you should all begin to see a common thread that runs through all of their descriptions. You should work to develop a generic picture of the processes they are describing. Along with the generic description you should also note the variations and the reasons for them.

When you have all agreed on the generic description and the variations you should complete this part by drawing a chart of the process and posting it and the list of variations in a spot where all can readily see it. That initial chart will form the foundation for all further discussion of possible improvements.

Appeal to the Participants

Now that you have a chart of the process you can start tracking how the process works. You should start by taking some baseline measurements such as: (1) the shortest, longest, and average time to complete the process, or (2) the total amount of time per month spent on reworking things that had to be re-done.

Be careful to focus on the performance of the process, not on the work of the individuals performing the process. Process improvement is a team effort. If there is a problem in the process it is always a process problem, not an individual problem.

Once you have some initial process performance measurements you can appeal to the participants to see if they can come up with any ways to improve on them. When the process is inconsistently performed, work is no fun. Things get left undone or done poorly or late and people can get upset by the crises and the need to work late to fix problems or the other signs of process disarray. When it gets bad enough, some may want to make things work more smoothly – but may not know how a process improvement program can help. You have to explain it to them and, even then, they may still think it's too hard and not worth the effort. So, you've got to be really convincing.

For a testimonial from a guy who left a company where the processes were running smoothly and is now in a company where the process is best described as chaos, see below:

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Subject: Work

From: davidz@xxx.com

To: techldr@yyyy.com

Date: Mon, 26 Mar 2001 15:58:00 -0600

After working for a company that went from chaos to process, process has become an expectation. It's like getting a faster machine, and then changing employers and working with a slower machine.

I'm back working in chaos, and a rare day goes by where I don't notice the difference.

David
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If you listen carefully to the people performing the process you may hear some ideas that will help everyone avoid some of the hassles and misunderstandings of how the work gets done. Bringing these to light for all to see should provide some incentive to try some process fixes (i.e., improvements) to make the process easier and more enjoyable.

However, that may not be enough. You may have to move on to the third component of this approach.

Deal With the Participants

This step brings together your organization's interests and your participant's interests. As noted before, an effective process improvement program provides a company with a strong competitive advantage and is valuable in marketing the services of the organization. It is worth something to the organization to set aside some marketing resources (money) to support development of a good process improvement program.

Losing a few bids because your company's costs were too high or your references said that your work has been faulty or late makes a strong case for investing marketing resources in process improvement. However, even if your company has been competing well you have to remember the old Satchel Paige quote: "Never look back, they may be gaining on you." Don't forget, your competitors also know about process improvement and are practicing it. To stay competitive you always have to do better.

So, consider setting up and funding a process improvement incentive program that will offer tangible rewards such as bonus money or free time to process participants when their process achieves measurable, marketable improvements. Such improvements could include documented error-free performance, predictable response times and lower costs per unit of output. There might also be some benefits in improved employee retention.

Final Notes

If you choose to take on the challenge, make sure that you reserve enough time and have the resources to do it. Keep it at the top of your priority list. Any slacking off in the effort will send a signal that you are not really serious about the program and you will lose whatever motivation you have been able to muster.

Keep what you do simple. Many companies have found simple, practical ways to implement their programs and have achieved the benefits with little cost. The key factor in keeping the improvement effort simple is to start with documenting what is already in place in a way that all can share. From that point on, potential improvements can be identified, tried, installed and documented on a continuous basis. That approach is simple, is not costly and is good business.

About Forward Momentum, LLC

Forward Momentum, LLC is a woman-owned small business (EDWOSB/WOSB) and Project Management Institute® (PMI) Registered Education Provider (REP). Since 2000, Forward Momentum's real-world experiences, coupled with practical application of theory, have helped realize project management, leadership and learning potential within to commercial, government and non-profit organizations. As a boutique firm, we pride ourselves in understanding your business, analyzing your learning and development needs, and driving efficiencies and growth through consultative engagement.

Let us show you how our approach can optimize your learning experience, improve your processes or empower your team by emailing dobusiness@forwardmomentum.net.

Visit www.forwardmomentum.net or www.linkedin.com/company/forward-momentum to learn how our experience can maximize your bottom line.

About the Author

Bill Flury is a successful project manager and systems engineer with a lifetime record of 85 projects – all on time, within budget and with fully satisfied clients. Since retirement, he has been developing and teaching process improvement training materials to help the next generation of project managers and systems engineers succeed by applying the lessons he has learned along the way.

Bill has just published an e-book that expands on these ideas, called *Draw What You Do: A Practical Approach to Process Improvement*.

You can find it in most e-book formats at:

Smashwords (Most e-book formats)

<http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/252060>

Barnes and Noble (Nook format)

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/draw-what-you-do-bill-flury/1113846265?ean=2940045069243>

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