Delivering desired outcome consistently

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When working in a small company or with a group of people, it's fairly easy for the methods by which work is produced and delivered to evolve informally under the influence of a key leader or two. But as the company or group grows, it becomes more difficult, if not impossible, to rely on such organic, ad hoc means of ordering the flow of work as a team. Eventually, the need for more detailed and reinforced processes becomes apparent in the pursuit of delivering consistent quality outcomes to clients.

Especially in a company that is organized hierarchically, in which power flows upward and employees follow a chain-of-command, processes are often developed by management teams and rolled out or pushed down to employees. However, in today's fast-paced and mostly remote work environments, in which staff want to determine the means and methods for themselves, traditional processes are likely not going to be followed.

Therein lies the rub for most firms – the processes described on paper often don't resemble the way work is actually conducted. How can process and practice be brought into better alignment? We suggest considering these three factors:

Prioritize those processes that are most important. A process is a series of steps taken to repeatedly achieve a certain result. The result is the goal, not the process – the process is the means to an end. Prioritize the goals or results that are most important to the firm's success, such as quality, risk management, or client service.

Get input from those who will follow the process. The best way to get buy-in is to involve those who will implement a process in its development. Further, ask for feedback from those individuals to continually improve and adapt the process to increase efficiency or adapt to changing conditions.

When we were faced with a series of preventable and atypical mistakes by a few of our project managers, our management team quickly developed a process to enhance communication across our project teams and with clients. We were pleased to see immediate results from our new process, but not surprisingly, the process was essentially abandoned after a few months. In today's environment, pushing down processes will typically only get obligatory compliance, which is often short-lived.

Allow flexibility. From where staff work, to how they get their jobs done, flexibility is expected these days. So we need to build flexibility into our processes. Management should provide boundaries and the expected results, and let staff manage the in-between.

Back to our example above. When it became apparent that our forced process was no longer employed, we changed our tactics. The management team defined the end goal, provided clear expectations, and let staff develop the specifics that would lead to, in this case, improved communications across our project teams and with clients. Project managers were given the freedom to work the process in a way that fit their management style and clients' preferences. This led to individual ownership of the process and, more importantly, to the desired outcome.

As an industry, we have done marvelously well in adapting to our new work environment, now it's time to apply that same flexibility to our processes – if you want to deliver consistent outcomes.

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