

# The Power of Process Orientation

by **Kay Sever**

**P**rior to becoming a continuous improvement consultant, I spent nearly 20 years at a *Fortune* 500 company, immersed in the most incredible corporate culture I have ever been a part of.

## In 50 Words Or Less


- **When organizations lack internal communication because departments act as silos, they lose time and money.**
- **Showing departments how they are suppliers and customers to one another's processes can correct this.**
- **This focus on process orientation addresses the often neglected people side of continuous improvement.**

I worked in every division, understood the production processes, financials, strategic issues and systems, and knew hundreds of people. That's why I was so surprised when I stumbled upon a silo involving my own department that taught me valuable lessons about the people side of improvement. I pass what I learned on to my clients today.

My last position—before a merger dissolved the company—was division level financial manager. On my second day in this role, one of my employees (someone I had known for several years) told me about a transactional problem with sales data. I suggested the employee resolve the issue with someone in marketing.

What I heard next was the last thing I expected: "Our department hasn't talked to marketing about these kinds of problems for seven years."

Shocked, I decided to do some investigating. I called one of the marketing managers I had known for many years and asked what he knew about this problem. He confirmed there was an issue between the two departments but said he didn't understand the details. What made this situation even more



puzzling was that this barrier had survived a move of the entire division (85 people) from Denver to Phoenix six years earlier.

Significant synergy could be gained by having the two groups work closely. How could managers in either department have permitted these silos? Did they lack the courage to address the problem, or were they so disengaged from the day-to-day activities that they didn't even see it? Whatever the reason, I was committed to removing the barrier as quickly as possible.

### **Breaking Down Walls**

A condition that could survive a move to another state and seven years of supervisor and employee turnover could not be removed by addressing personality issues or creating an opportunity for finger pointing. Based on my experience with continuous improvement, I believed focusing on process was the best approach to removing the barrier.

My plan was to have both groups share their process flows with each other in a series of joint departmental meetings. Each session would develop process thinking and help the groups understand how to support each other by seeing themselves as customers and suppliers of each other. Personal and personnel issues would not be on the agenda.

I called the same marketing manager again and shared my plan. Without hesitation, he agreed to help.

I already had set a goal for my department to develop process maps to capture our intellectual property and create better training materials, but we hadn't yet started this project. The marketing department, however, already had process maps it shared with customers. I asked them to go first, with the agreement that my department would share our maps as they were completed.

The marketing manager and I agreed not to tell our groups what situation had initiated these sessions. At this point, our company was between phases one and two of its continuous improvement program, and we told our employees that the inter-departmental meetings were part of the work for phase two.

Within a week, the first session was scheduled. It was interesting to watch everyone find a seat. One

group gathered on the right side of the room and the other on the left.

The meeting went well. At first, there were no questions or discussion, but toward the end, employees from both groups began exchanging ideas about how they could better support each other at their process touchpoints—the points at which the two departments' processes overlapped.

**How could managers in either department have permitted these silos? Did they lack the courage to address the problem, or were they so disengaged from the day-to-day activities that they didn't even see it?**

What followed confirmed that we had chosen the right approach. It also proved behavior can change quickly if people focus on process and understand how they add value to downstream work.

The morning after our first session, one of the marketing employees came to our department to ask for help with a process problem. Within three weeks, a customer service manager asked my group to participate in a conference call to the computer support department. The purpose of the call was to raise the priority for fixing a marketing system problem that resulted in data errors for both marketing and my department.

Because marketing now understood more about

the data flow connection between our departments, they also understood the impact of the system error reached beyond the marketing group and recognized the potential to help both groups by correcting the problem. This joint effort was the first of many synergistic efforts between the departments.

Remaining process review sessions were scheduled regularly, and cooperation between both groups continued to grow.

### **About This Approach**

Hidden barriers to success and sustainability of continuous improvement programs exist in almost all organizations. Such barriers often transcend typical continuous improvement tactics applied to produce culture change.

Cultural conditions that create obstacles to improvement are not always obvious, but their symptoms are easily recognizable:

- Organizational silos that are perpetuated, tolerated or accepted by management.
- Processes delayed by months or years due to rework and incomplete form submissions.
- Capital approvals delayed for weeks or months due to incomplete or incorrect data.
- Personality conflicts that interfere with efficient communication or process management.
- Start-up dates for new equipment or operations that are pushed months past initial estimates because no one seems to understand the master plan.

These symptoms and their associated hidden barriers still can exist after a continuous improvement implementation if the company depends only on charts, graphs and process flows to deliver improvement and culture change. This is because charts, graphs and process flows do not directly address the people side of improvement, the source of all the symptoms noted earlier.

Process orientation, on the other hand, does address the people side of improvement. It breaks down silos in an organization, improves communication and reduces rework that occurs when multiple departments execute a process. It involves educating the process suppliers and customers (internal and external) about what your process requires and where value is being lost.

Suppliers and customers then can see how they

can add value, anticipate your needs and suggest changes to help all parties meet their requirements. Process orientation enables internal and external suppliers, process owners and customers to think as one mind about maximizing the performance of jointly owned processes.

When employees are trained in the process orientation approach and practice customer/supplier thinking, they tend to incorporate process thinking into everything they do. That's when an organization's culture moves toward self actualization on a grand scale.

Counter to this, many organizations hand out org charts to all employees, with boxes drawn around areas of responsibility. These tend to encourage the formation of organizational silos. The box for each individual defines his or her role but often does not include touchpoints with other departments, which are assumed to be co-owned by department managers.

In reality, there often is no joint accountability, so managers don't make the touchpoints a priority. This is especially true for the suppliers, or contributors, to a process. As a result, broken touchpoint processes become areas of contention between departments and might go unresolved, even during a process improvement initiative.

### **United We Stand**

How are individual employees and departments affected by process orientation? It helps departments and managers proactively choose to co-own problems. It facilitates interdepartmental communication required for improvement because it calls for face-to-face contact.

Sending e-mails and handing out manuals are ineffective methods of communicating process changes when more than one department is involved. Unfortunately, these methods of communicating change are chosen because they are quick, easy and allow the process owner to avoid unwanted confrontation. Such impersonal ways of communicating change prevent the culture change that is supposed to result from process improvement.

Lack of employee commitment to change is the ultimate deal breaker for continuous improvement. People must believe a new way of doing things really will be better for them before they choose to

make a permanent commitment to change. Process orientation helps employees make this choice by showing them how they personally affect the rest of the organization and the value they create when they perform according to what their customers

need, not what they want to deliver or have always delivered.

Tools for breaking down silos and getting commitment for change with process orientation include:

- A joint meeting between all process suppliers

**TABLE 1** Process Touchpoint Matrix

Suppliers to the process	Step one	Step two	Step three	Step four	Step five	Step six	Step seven	Step eight	Step nine	Step 10	Step 11
	Reserve identification	Initial financial evaluation	Pre-feasibility review	Feasibility study	Mine plan finalization	Permitting	Contractor selection	Cost effective analysis	Site construction	Production permits	Start-up checklist—production operator
Regional engineering											
Accounting/finance											
Contract services											
Geology											
Land management											
Environmental/permitting											
Purchasing/vendors											
Safety											
Sales											
Site managers											
Vice presidents											
Corporate office geology											
Corporate office quality control											
Corporate office construction design											
Corporate office engineering											
Production operators (internal/contractor)											
Outside agencies											

■ = Active role      ■ = Approval role

## CHANGE MANAGEMENT

- and the process owner or customer.
- An agenda that creates a shared need for cooperation and change.
  - A visual of the entire process, showing the activities that occur and all the stakeholders involved in the execution of the work processes, communication and approvals.
  - A clear description of the process steps involving the process suppliers.
  - A list of the specific tools or tasks that will be different for each supplier to the process. This will help each supplier understand what will be different for him or her without having to understand the details for other suppliers.
  - An estimate of the value being lost due to the current state.
  - What will be gained if everyone does his or her part to adopt the new procedures and tools.
  - What will be lost (financial and otherwise) if a supplier to the process drops the ball.

- Process orientation is perceived as a lot of unnecessary work for companies not used to rolling out process changes in this manner. These companies recognize the value only after going through the process the first time.

### Benefits of Process Orientation

Several of my clients have benefited from process orientation. Here are some examples.

**Example one: employees not understanding the plan.** How many times have you seen employees try to make decisions in the dark? The planners go to great lengths to perfect the plan and then hold it close to the vest. The planners might answer questions about the plan, but what they need to do is share the plan with all stakeholders.

I was meeting with one of my client's process improvement teams when this issue surfaced. This particular team was making decisions about daily priorities without knowing whether it was meeting

**TABLE 2** Waiting on Other Departments

Process step	Average number of days of improvement per project for waiting on departments	Groups that can help reduce waiting on other departments
* Reserve identification	Five	Geology, land management, environmental, sales, corporate office geology/quality control/construction/engineering
Initial financial evaluation	Two	Accounting, contract services
Prefeasibility review	Five	Accounting, geology, environmental, safety, site management
Feasibility study	Two	Geology, environmental
* Mine plane finalization	Two	Accounting, geology, environmental, safety, site management, corporate management
* Permitting	45	Land management, engineering
Contractor selection	Five	Contract services, production operators
Cost effectiveness analysis	15	Accounting, purchasing, site management, corporate management
Site construction	15	Environmental, safety, production operators
* Production permits	Two	Environmental, production operators
* Start-up checklist—production operator	Zero	Production operators
* Preparations for coal delivery	10	
Total	108	

\* indicates outside agency involvement



the organization's weekly plan. The engineering department developed the plan but did not communicate it to the process improvement team.

Using process orientation, I suggested we invite the engineering department to the next team meeting to show them the process improvement work we were doing and ask for their cooperation in communicating the weekly plan. I expected a lot of support for this idea, but to my surprise, the team opposed it.

The improvement team members were intimidated by the personalities in engineering and were afraid to ask for what they needed. I managed to convince them it was OK to ask, and they agreed to invite engineering to the next meeting.

Engineering showed up but resisted cooperating at first. Management had not previously asked them to communicate regularly with operations. After we explained the steps we had taken to identify engineering as a supplier to the process, the engineering people began to see it our way. They agreed to invite an improvement team member to their weekly planning meeting to get updates.

The improvement team took them up on the offer, and weekly updates are still occurring, preventing rework and confusion and allowing the improvement team to meet the organization's weekly plan.

**Example two: start-up process for new operations.** A client wanted to develop a formal process for starting a new operation. Over the previous few years, start-ups had experienced significant delays, rework and cost, eating up several months and millions of dollars.

Engineering was the process owner but had to interface with multiple departments across the company, as well as state agencies. I thought process orientation was the perfect tool for the design and implementation phases of the operation.

When we started the design phase, each team member was an expert in his or her process step, but no team member had a vision for the entire process. Several team meetings were dedicated to defining the details of each process step and the participants required for execution. Process breakdowns were usually occurring between departments due to missing or incomplete information required by a downstream customer (internal or

external). These breakdowns resulted in much of the delay, rework and excess cost for each start-up.

We designed new checklists, forms and communications to push the decision making and information gathering upstream. As this work progressed, the commitment and enthusiasm of the team increased.

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During the implementation phase, the team had determined the new start-up process could reduce time required for the entire process by at least 20% (150 days) and avoid thousands to millions of dollars in cost overruns. Commitment of all internal and external stakeholders in the process was key to delivering this value. Some of the team members, however, said other departments and agencies probably would not cooperate or buy into process changes.

We used process orientation with great success to build commitment of the participating departments during the rollout session. All internal stakeholders were invited to the regional rollout of the new process. Giving stakeholders a vision of how their roles impact the entire process is crucial to getting commitment, so I developed two visuals to demonstrate this.

In the process touchpoint matrix (see Table 1, p. 49), major process steps appear as column headings. The connection of each process step to process stakeholders is indicated by the gray boxes.

This table shows the steps important to each department and emphasizes that stakeholders need to be familiar with the steps they participate in but do not need to be intimately familiar with all process steps. This is especially important when rolling out a far-reaching and complex process. Make it easy for stakeholders to adopt change. They should not feel overwhelmed when asked to change the way they work.

Table 2 (p. 50) indicates the number of days the process was delayed due to wait time between departments. It shows each department has a role in the overall achievement of the improvement goal, sending the message that they are all in it together.

The day before the internal rollout session, we held separate meetings with outside agencies. I had predicted the agencies would be interested in our process and might even modify their processes as a result of our meetings with them. Team members told me it would never happen and the agencies might not even be willing to attend. Instead, the agencies were quite interested in the process. One group even offered to create an additional checklist to help itself and my client become more efficient.

**Example three: operations and maintenance improving their working relationship.** After learning interdepartmental relationships qualified as opportunities for improvement, a maintenance team I was working with decided to document interdepartmental touchpoints between maintenance and operations and schedule sharing sessions that would break down barriers between the departments. This work is still underway.

### Change Takes Time

Bringing down barriers and nurturing interdepartmental relationships results in real culture change but takes time. Nurturing change is like tending to a garden. Management must be willing to give employees time to build trust between departments and develop commitment to working together in new ways.

Patience is key. I watch for the following signs to know sustainable culture change is occurring for my clients when they use process orientation as part of continuous improvement work:

- Language changes from finger pointing to talk of broken processes.

- A continuous improvement program changes to a balanced approach—removing people barriers is just as important as proficient use of tools.
- Stress level goes down.
- Communications are process focused.
- Employees step up and co-own interdepartmental issues.
- Employees ask the right questions.
- Measuring change is as important as measuring today's performance.

Process orientation is foundation work for any continuous improvement program. Tools such as control charts, trend graphs, root cause analysis, Six Sigma and lean will not effect a sustainable culture change unless employees understand the upstream and downstream requirements and make those requirements a priority in their daily work and communication. Process orientation has the potential to deliver significant culture change because it addresses the people side of improvement.

As for the barrier between my department and marketing at my former employer, I never did learn what caused it. It became irrelevant when the changes materialized. Instead of opening old wounds, I chose to stay process focused, set a leadership example for continuous improvement and tend the garden.

**KAY SEVER** is president of *OptimiZ Consulting LLC* in Gilbert, AZ, and a frequent speaker on quality and barriers to improvement. She earned a bachelor's degree from Purdue University's Krannert School of Management in West Lafayette, IN. Sever is a member of ASQ and a certified quality improvement associate.

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