Why Good Processes Go Bad: A Case Study

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Agenda

- Introduction
- Case Study
- Factors that Contribute to Process Failure
- Ways to Avoid Failure
- Conclusion
- Q & A
Introduction

The Need for Processes

Without formal, approved, processes, product releases would be managed by fly-by-night, seat-of-the-pants monitoring and direction that would be haphazard at best, guided by the loudest voice and the whims of the manager of the day.

In other words, it would be prone to a chaotic business-as-usual approach.
Visual Analogy

VIDEO — Building Tangrams available [here](#) (used the one 9th one on that page).

Purpose — The video shows the process of building tangram puzzles, with each puzzle being a “project” that included:

- Requirements doc – The puzzle’s name (note how limited the requirements were)
- Management dump – Dropping pieces into play
- Chaotic start – Pieces laying scattered
- Teamwork – Hands/fingers working frantically
- QA – Fine-tuning and adjusting pieces’ layout
- Comments: 1) Notice the picture at the end after all was done. Would have been nice to see what needed to be built at the beginning. 2) Notice only a brief moment between projects to rest and reflect on a job well done. 3) Imagine multitasking multiple projects at once...
Case Study

**Company:** Large software development corporation

**Characteristics:** Divided into BUs

**Need:** Standardized means of monitoring product and market readiness

**Support:** Mandated by the EVP, critical to corporate success, staffed, funded, communicated

**Effectiveness:** Thorough, well thought out, relevant

**Reception:** Product teams welcomed, Management supported
What was the process?

- **Phase Review Cycle - Purpose**
  - Monitor and control the flow of projects through the development cycle and establishment of sustaining marketing activities
What were the steps?

- Phase Review Cycle - Process
  - **Charter** – Perform research of the technology
  - **Proposal** – Data-driven product scope recommendation
  - **Commit** – Review plans for development and business fit
  - **Interlock** – Cross reference against dependent projects
  - **Beta** – Include inspection by customers and partners
  - **General Availability** – Completed product ready for sale
  - **Measure** – Compare actual sales against projections
  - **Evaluate** – Determine timing and plan for EOL
Case Study: End Result

In less time than it took to develop the new process, the implementation collapsed and the process was set aside.
Case Study: End Result

In a word: Failure
Case Study

Question of the Day:

WHY DID THIS FAIL?!?
Factors that Contribute to Failure

The Dirty Dozen
Factors that Contribute to Failure

1) Lack of Enforced Behaviors
   - BUs could use or avoid steps
   - No standard approach
   - No meshing of Phase Review process and BUs
Factors that Contribute to Failure

2) Lengthy Rollout Coupled with “Grandfathering”

- It’s coming...it’s coming...it’s still coming...
- Already started? Just keep going status quo...
Factors that Contribute to Failure

3) Executives Lacked Adherence

- Officially supported, not followed in practice
- Executives mandated pre-approval
Factors that Contribute to Failure

4) No Clear Ownership

- Key roles were undefined wrt “who”
- Leadership was “part-time”
Factors that Contribute to Failure

5) Leadership Delegated to Non-Organizationally-Focused Personnel

- PTL: PM vs. PjM
Factors that Contribute to Failure

6) No Templates, Standards, or Samples

- Cited forms without providing outlines
- Agendas were up to the BUs
Factors that Contribute to Failure

7) Lacked Distinct Deliverables

- Named recommended deliverables without a clear list
- Wanted to provide “a process” not “mandate tools”
**Activity**

**Operation:** Tangram

**Purpose** - Demonstrate the impact of being given an assignment without specific instructions, examples or template.

**Execution** – 4 volunteers were divided into 2 teams with each person given a tangram puzzle.

**Phase 1:** Each team was told to use their puzzles to “build an animal” with only 1 puzzle per animal, and given 30 seconds to plan and 2 minutes to execute. Each team built 2 animals – “1 animal per puzzle” without realizing both teammates were to build the same animal, such that each team had built “an animal.” Completion time: ~90 sec.

**Phase 2:** Each team was given a card with a silhouette of the puzzle they were to solve, thus receiving instructions via a “template” of sorts. Teammates helped each other solve the puzzle and build identical images each. Completion time: ~1 min.

**Phase 3:** Each team was given a card with a silhouette that had white lines showing specifically where each puzzle piece was to be laid, thus receiving not just a template, but a sample of a “good job” to work against. Completion time: 30 seconds.
Factors that Contribute to Failure

8) Overemphasis of Signatures

- More physical space on the forms reserved for signatures than other data
- Became the battle cry of the paranoid
Factors that Contribute to Failure

9) Required a Cultural Change

- Avoided communicating this point
- Claimed it was essentially “business as usual” to minimize resistance
Factors that Contribute to Failure

10) Overstressed the Business while Ignoring the Product

- Meetings focused on business readiness
- Product readiness was glanced over
Factors that Contribute to Failure

11) Changed Key Terms

- Changed names of development phases
- All aspects seemed like a new world
Factors that Contribute to Failure

12) A Perception of “Too Many Secrets”

- Invited only a “privileged few”
- Results not forwarded to the teams
Summary

This was a good process that was both mandated and wanted.

Fine tuning it and its delivery could have saved it.
Ways to Avoid Failure

1) Formalize the Process & its Structure
   - Don’t be afraid to mandate
2) Allow Approved Adaptations

- Mandate that a “flavor” be carried out
Ways to Avoid Failure

3) Actually Follow the Process

- Ensure Upper Management Support
- Keep Grandfathering to a Minimum
Ways to Avoid Failure

4) Clarify Expectations

- Generate Detailed Templates
- Assign Distinct Owners to Deliverables
- Where Possible, Use Current Tools
Ways to Avoid Failure

5) Effective Leadership

- Go with Strengths, Not Politics
6) Stick with Terms that Make Sense

- Avoid Cute or Nebulous Terms
- Play to the Corporate Cultural Strengths
Ways to Avoid Failure

7) Streamline

- Condense the Phases to the Critical
- Weave in with Other Efforts
Ways to Avoid Failure

8) Review Necessities

- Product Reviews Should Review the Product
  - Don’t overlook the product while focusing on the business, and vice versa
Ways to Avoid Failure

9) Focus on the Objective

- De-emphasize Procedure
- Focus on the data
  - Use the Procedure as a Means of Obtaining or Discussing the Data
Ways to Avoid Failure

10) Include Accountability

- Must Have Teeth
- Modifications Must Still Be Mandated
Ways to Avoid Failure

11) Prepare, Prepare For, and Manage the Cultural Shifts

- New processes introduce a new way of life in either minor or major ways
- Study up on “Managing Organizational Change”
Ways to Avoid Failure

12) Facilitate Getting Teams to Own the Process

- Few Follow “Someone Else’s” Process
  - Inconvenient Intrusion
  - Someone Else’s Problem
Success Factors

- **Best Processes:**
  - Seem Like a Natural Fit
  - Quickly Understood
  - Simple Deliverables & Expectations
  - Don’t Threaten Authority or Autonomy
  - Include Templates & Examples
  - Has Support from Top Down & Bottom Up
Summary

- Never assume a well-thought, needed process will simply take hold

- New processes need to be:
  - Nurtured
  - Mandated
  - Controlled
  - Enforced
  - Cudgeled
  - Given Time to Evolve
Additional Questions

Q & A
Afterward, the question was asked **how to best help your organization realize they have an ineffective or overbearing process.** The answer depends largely on the organization’s culture, maturity level, politics, and a host of other factors. One approach that may work is to not just point out the problem, but also **recommend a solution that either streamlines, fine tunes, or simplifies situation.** Pointing out a problem without providing a reasonable solution can come across as whining, not winning. Regarding “who” to give the feedback to, also depends on the organization. In some cases, it can go directly to those responsible for the process. Most often, the safest route is to **go up your own management chain.** Your manager should want to help you be successful, and passing along reasonable solutions can do that, as well as “win points” for both you and your manager.
Thank You

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