How Do We Get There from Here?

Process Improvement vs. Problem-Solving

A good many organizations spend 80% of their time solving problems and 20% of their time improving processes. Shaw Resources is trying to reverse that ratio. Why?

On The Road: It Helps To Have A Map

People sometimes confuse process improvement with problem-solving. They think that if they find a problem in the process and fix it, they're improving the process. While problem solving may be a first step, it rarely results in an improved process. Let's look at why.

Problem-solving focuses narrowly on individual problems. Problem-solving fails to consider how solutions relate to one another, to the process as a whole, or to the outcomes of a process. Fixing a given problem may not affect an outcome at all. The fix may even create another problem, because no one has considered its effect on other activities in the process. Problem-solving is like taking a trip without knowing your destination and then wondering why you never arrived.

Process improvement, on the other hand, considers the whole process, main-taming a steady focus on the outcomes customers receive. To improve processes, you use a map, a clear depiction of the territory and the destination. When you spot something that is wrong, you still know where you are and where you are going. You locate what has gone wrong and analyze it in the context of the big picture. You assess changes according to their impact on the process and on the customer. You implement changes that will eliminate what has gone wrong and still get you to your destination, generally more efficiently than before. A map helps you plan and explore. A map keeps you from getting lost.

Design vs. Repair

Process improvement addresses the design of a process. When changes are made, they are made to the process's design—how the process works. Just as a good highway design is essential to safe, efficient, and pleasurable travel, a well-designed process is essential to outcomes that work, are cost-effective, and please customers.

Problem-solving is not concerned with design but rather with potholes and bumps in the road. Problem-solving is road repair, a matter of patches and detours. Problem-solving does not get at what is causing the potholes in the first place. That is why problem-solving is endless roadwork.

Prevent It vs. Fix It

Process improvement is preventive and pro-active, while problem-solving is reactive. Process improvement asks the question: How can we change the process to prevent this undesirable thing from happening? Analysis involves uncovering the root causes of problems.

In contrast, problem-solvers ask: How can we fix this undesirable thing that is happening? The emphasis is on the undesirable thing, not how or why it is happening. Very often, problem-solving is a reaction to pressure—operational failures, management demands, deadlines, customer complaints. What gets fixed is the problem's current symptom. There is no attempt to get at the root of the problem and prevent it from reoccurring.

Simplify vs. Complicate

The approaches of process improvement and problem-solving are also different. Generally, process improvement simplifies processes. Eliminating defects and shortening cycle times usually involve taking something out: flaws, unnecessary steps in the process, and so on.

Problem- solving, however, frequently adds activities, either to deal with the problem or in anticipation of its recurrence. Inspection activities and additional sign-off forms are examples. The aim is to correct each

problem as it happens and possibly to catch it early on. The assumption underlying problem-solving, though, is that the problem will occur. Process improvement assumes the problem can be avoided for all time.

Long-term vs. Short-term Results

Because process improvement considers the design and workings of the total process, as well as the prevention of problems, changes are long-term. They are made logically, carefully, and once. Process improvement is based on a body of statistical information used to target changes that will help the organization achieve its goals and monitor results. Process improvement looks at a change to see if it is worth the investment. If it is, the change is implemented permanently.

In contrast, problem-solving results in short-term solutions. This is partly because of its narrow focus on individual problems and partly because of its "fix it" rather than "prevent it" approach. Moreover, often the numerous fixes don't add up to significant gains because they are isolated solutions, unconnected to the overall goals of the organization—the destination. Problem-solving can be diversionary, preventing an organization from making lasting changes.

A Task vs. a Methodology

An organization engaged in problem-solving wastes effort and can even find itself moving away from its goals. To be always looking down at potholes and bumps in the road can keep you rolling along a road to nowhere.

This is not to say that solving problems is a worthless endeavor, however. Like road repair, problem-solving cannot be eliminated; it is a necessary task. But it is a task, not a methodology.

Sometimes an organization has problems so obvious and critical, they need to be fixed immediately. But you want to move beyond problem-solving to process improvement, beyond tasks to a comprehensive methodology. For problem-solving to pay off, it needs to be incorporated into the more encompass-ing scope of process improvement.

Watch Where You're Going

To move beyond problem solving, you need a systematic method to follow, in other words, a map. Below is a general outline of the steps involved in process improvement.

- Understand the big picture. Before making changes to a process, you need to understand the whole process from start to end.
- Identify the process' s critical path—the main activities between the process's start and end points.
- Examine the critical path for weaknesses and potential problems.
- Prioritize the weaknesses according to their impact.
- Collect and analyze data.
- Take action to prevent problems and strengthen weaknesses.

One last important point: It is essential to understand your process from the customer's point of view. Taking the customer' s point of view is critical, because it is the customer who decides whether your outcomes are inadequate, good enough, or superior.

Another way of saying this is to say that your destination is your customer' s destination. You want to be where your customer wants to be. To get there, you may solve problems along the way, but it is through the process improvement methodology that you can keep your destination in clear focus. The concept is simple: If you watch where you're going, you're a lot more likely to get there.