



eBook

# 7 Ways You Might Be Stifling Your Process Improvement Initiative



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# Introduction

Improving business processes can be a tricky endeavor. In order to optimize, improve or overhaul a process, we must have a firm understanding of why the process exists in the first place and what it is expected to do. We need to understand broader factors like the customer's expectation on how fast (or how well) the process should operate, and how we position our product or service (the check in process at a motel is likely to be very different when compared with a five star hotel). This is before we even consider human factors, culture, technology, and so on.

It is very easy for us to lose sight of one or more of these factors, and if this happens it is likely that our process initiative will run off the rails. There are a number of common pitfalls that await the unprepared, and this eBook focuses on seven that warrant our attention. The seven topics aren't presented in any specific order, and the importance and relevance of each will vary depending on the specific project or organizational context. However, remaining conscious of these (and other) pitfalls, and carrying out holistic analysis of the business situation will help us to ensure that our process improvement activities are effective and realize the benefits that our stakeholders want and need.



# 1 Different perspectives on “Why”

It is very easy to inadvertently get into a situation where different, often senior, stakeholders have slightly different perspectives on why change is necessary in the first place. Although on the surface they may appear to agree, and certainly high level statements (such as “We want to improve the end-to-end sales process”) are likely to meet universal approval, we may find out that our stakeholders have subtly different views on what words like “improve” actually mean.

For example, “improve” could mean any combination of:

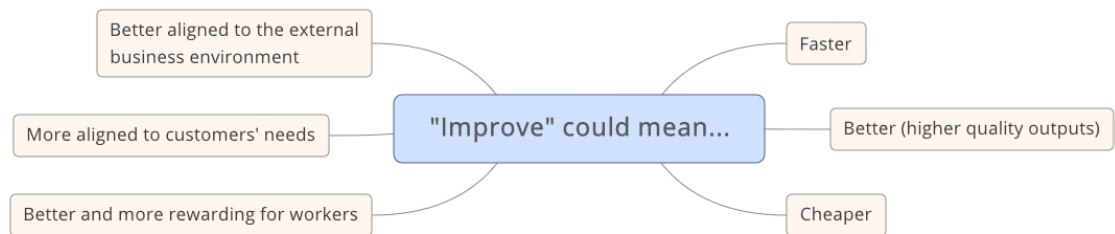


Figure 1: Some potential interpretations on the word “improve”

Additionally, some stakeholders may be prepared to compromise one factor to achieve another. You can imagine two stakeholders agreeing that they want a “better” and “improved” process, but having two very different perspectives on what that means:

“ I want the end-to-end sales process to be quicker, so that we place more orders. I can accept an increase in the cost of processing orders to achieve this  
Stakeholder A ”

“ I want the end-to-end sales process to be quicker, by removing redundancy and looking for efficiencies. I expect cost of processing new orders to decline  
Stakeholder B ”

A useful way of articulating the goals and objectives that are being sought is to define the outcomes that are desired. We can start with the end in mind, and define the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). In the 2014 book “Business Analysis Techniques: 99 essential tools for success”, Cadle, Paul & Turner provide the following definitions:

“ Critical Success Factors: ...are the areas of performance that the organization considers vital to its success. They are typically broad-brush statements.  
(Cadle, Paul & Turner, 2014) ”

Key Performance Indicators ...are related to the CSFs, and define the specific areas to be monitored in order to determine whether the required level of performance has been achieved.  
(Cadle, Paul & Turner, 2014)

Although CSFs and KPIs are often applied at an organizational level, it is also useful to consider them at a project or initiative level, and ask the question “What does success look and feel like?” and “How will we know if we’ve succeeded”. A set of CSFs and KPIs (with associated targets added when known) can help add a huge amount of clarity and will also ensure that our stakeholders are on the same page. Imagine we are working for a company that manufactures office chairs that is aiming to optimize its sales process. Example CSFs and KPIs for a hypothetical process optimization initiative could include:

## CSF #1: To provide a cost-efficient end-to-end sales process

Possible KPIs include:

- Order Processing Cost (£x per order),
- Cost of training new staff on process (£x or x hours per staff member)
- Number of minutes manual administration required per order (x/order on average)

## CSF #2: To provide excellent customer service and achieve satisfaction during the sales process

Possible KPIs include:

- Customer satisfaction of sales process (measured by survey, x% rate at 7/10 or above)
- Number of complaints related to the sales process (x/1000 orders),
- Number of returns due to errors in the sales process (x/1000 orders)

Clearly these are just examples, and more granular refinement would be required if this were a real project. However, by drilling down into the CSFs and KPIs, we start to uncover why the process initiative is required and what our senior stakeholders are looking to achieve. By ensuring that there is a common view on the required outcomes, we can ensure that effort is spent in the right places. We then start our process work out with a clear guiding beacon that we can rely on throughout.



## 2 Early Solutioneering

As alluded to earlier, one problem that behests many projects and initiatives is the tendency for us (or our stakeholders) to take an early solution focus. Problem solving, quite rightly, is seen as a crucial and useful activity in organizations—yet there is a tendency to:

- a) Gravitate towards a solution before the underlying problem or opportunity has been sufficiently understood
- b) Stop at the first viable solution that is discovered

This can lead to situations where we inadvertently let the solution drive the problem. Perhaps our stakeholders fall in love with a new software package/app/approach/idea and ask us to implement it. Of course, their idea may well be valid—but to be sure we'll need to understand the nuances of the existing situation. On top of this, it is important (wherever possible) to consider multiple solutions. Rarely is there only one viable option—yet when we are considering solutions there is the tendency to stop at the first. Spending a little bit more time considering what other solutions might be viable can pay significant dividends. This allows the solutions to be compared and contrasted against each other, before a commitment is made. We might find a potential solution that is cheaper and better aligned to the outcomes that are driving the initiative in the first place. This is certainly an activity where having the CSFs and KPIs mentioned earlier will be useful!



## 3 Lack of Engagement and Commitment

For process improvement initiatives to succeed, we need to ensure that stakeholders of all levels are engaged. However, we often need significant commitment from top-level executives. They must ensure that the relevant resources are available, but also it's crucial that they support the initiative on a day-to-day basis. This might involve acting as an advocate, and openly showing support to both their peers and their direct reports. This will then make it easier when we need to ask for time with middle-managers as well as workers and users at the coal face. If there is a lack of commitment, or even worse a resistance, at the top level then the project is likely to be difficult. It is worth spending time understanding the nature of the resistance, and spending time with the relevant stakeholder to try to get them on-side. This is part of the wider discipline of stakeholder engagement and management, which is crucial not only at an executive level, but at all levels of an organization.

It can also be useful to set expectations up front, in a Terms of Reference, Scoping Document or Project Initiation Document. This needn't be arduous or bureaucratic; often a 'Summary on a Page' can be enough to clearly set expectations and ensure that there is a shared view and understanding.





## 4 Misunderstanding the ‘as is’

In many cases, our process improvement initiatives will start by analyzing the current process, and developing an understanding of the ‘as is’ process. We are often under pressure to undertake this work quickly—sometimes our stakeholders might not understand why we need to undertake this work at all! Some stakeholders may have a fixation with a particular solution, and may try to steer us towards implementing that before we have finished our analysis. I am sure we have all worked on a project where a stakeholder has said something like:

“Why do we need all the analysis? Can’t we just go out and buy some software? I’ve heard that XYZ Solution by ABC Vendor is perfect. And they tell me it’s ‘lift and drop’ so it’ll be no effort to implement!”

Of course, the reality is that gaining an understanding of how things work currently can help us diagnose any problems and understand which solutions might be more appropriate. There is rarely a silver bullet, and whilst IT or process automation may well be an option, this needs to be compared against other possible solutions. In any case, implementing IT affects other aspects of the process too, so gaining a rich understanding of the current state is crucial so that any impact can be objectively assessed.

In situations where we do have the time to analyze the current state, there is still the tricky issue of establishing how the process currently operates. A careful distinction should be drawn here between how the process is supposed to operate and how it actually operates. In some cases we may find dusty folders or abandoned repositories full of process, procedural and training documentation that looks useful. We may even be told that the documents are followed and complied with rigidly—but it would be dangerous to take this assertion at face value. In reality, it is quite possible that there are areas where the process has diverged from the ‘official’ specification, with end-users developing their own workarounds. We have all probably observed situations where end-users deviate from the ‘official’ system to paste information in and out of a desktop spreadsheet or database, because the tools that they were provided with never quite worked as expected.

It is crucial that we find out and understand these workarounds too, as these can be indicative of areas where the original process did not work correctly, or where the business environment has changed and the process hasn’t been adapted. In some cases there may be lessons that can be learnt from these workarounds that can be incorporated into a new version of the process.

It is therefore crucial that we use a range of elicitation or investigation techniques when working to understand the current process. It can be tempting to rely on a favorite few—perhaps one-to-one interviews with relevant staff and a workshop—yet these might leave us vulnerable to ‘tacit knowledge’. By ‘tacit knowledge’ we mean

information and knowledge that our stakeholders know so well they have forgotten that they know it. A useful illustration of this would be to explain to someone verbally how to ride a bicycle. Whilst I am sure you would convey the main areas to consider when riding a bike, there would undoubtedly be things that you would forget to mention—and you may make an assumption that the person you are explaining to has a precise understanding of what ‘brakes’ and ‘handlebars’ are. The same is true with process operators—they may have years (or decades) of experience, and much of what they do may be second nature.

It is therefore also very useful to use observation. By building rapport with the relevant process stakeholders and observing them in their real working situation, potentially over a number of occasions and with a number of individual operators in different teams who form part of the process, we get closer to the detail and will start to see the real process—warts and all! We can ask where the inputs to each task come from, where the outputs go to, and whether there are any problems. We can ask “what if” and “what else” to understand whether there are any exceptions to the process, and we can even start to collate figures to get an indication of volume (although there is always a danger that we are observing during a peak or a trough, so there may be more appropriate techniques if we are aiming for quantitative measures).

The International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA®) list a number of elicitation techniques in the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK® Guide). These are shown below, and are well worth our consideration. Further information about each technique can be found in the BABOK® itself

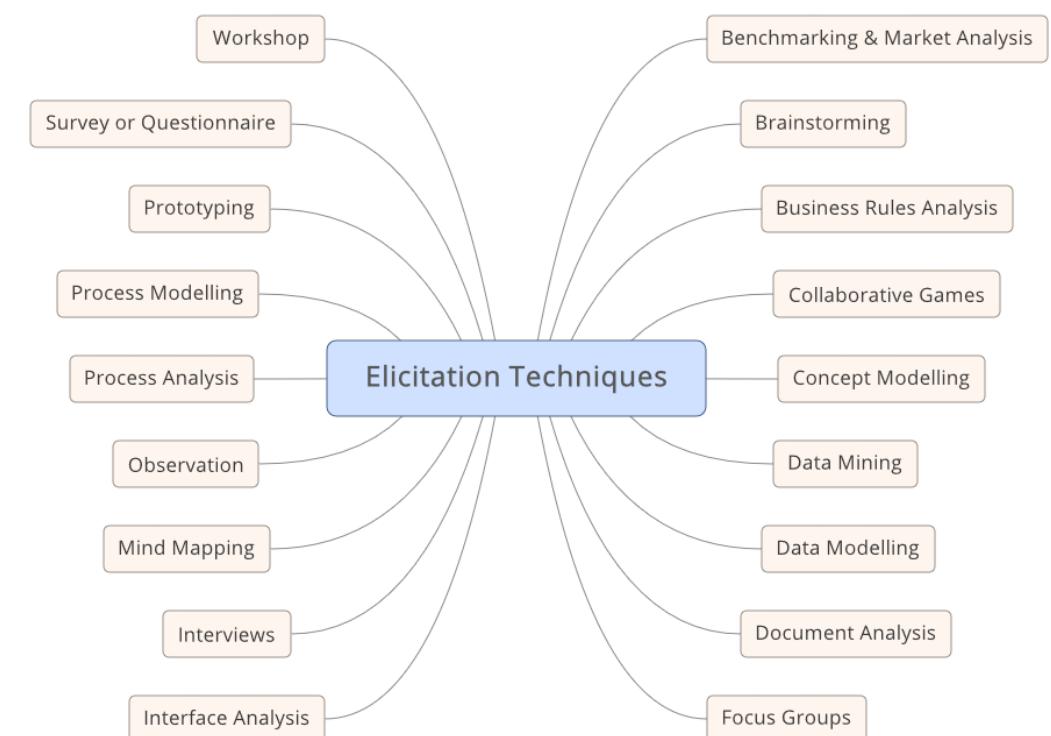


Figure 2: Elicitation Techniques from BABOK®. (IIBA, 2015)

## 5 Missing the end-to-end (and moving the problem)

It is very easy, if we are not careful, to solve one process problem and find that another crops up somewhere else. We remove a constraint or bottleneck from one part of a process, and miraculously another appears—and we have the net effect of simply moving the problem around.

There are a number of reasons this might happen. Firstly, and most importantly, it may be that we haven't fully understood the context of the full end-to-end process. Let's build on our earlier example of a company that manufactures office chairs. If we set out to optimize the sales process, freeing up the sales team from routine admin, this would undoubtedly be a good thing. With more time more prospects can be contacted and it is likely that more sales will be made. Yet, if the sales team sells at a rate that is faster than the production team can produce the chairs, then we are in trouble! And if we have slimmed down the administration to the point where we aren't collecting the information required by the invoicing team, then we could find ourselves in the perfect storm where we deliver products late and then have to contact the customer again to obtain further crucial information.

An antidote is to take a step back and start by analyzing processes at an organizational level. Considering the core processes that flow through the organization, and the tasks and handovers within those processes can be crucial. Two useful questions to ask early in the analysis process are:



- Where does this process start? What is the business event that triggers it?
- Where does this process end? What are the possible end events?



It is likely that stakeholders will have differing views, and it is worth reconciling these up front. Drawing on the example mentioned earlier, one stakeholder may consider the end of the process to be “Products Dispatched”, another may consider it to be “Products Received by Customer” and another may consider it to be “Invoice Paid”. Agreeing the process scope and is crucial to avoid a mismatch of expectations.

## 6 Neglecting to Communicate Early

Building on from the previous section, it is worth noting that change of any type can be disruptive and even scary. Whilst it is likely that some of our stakeholders will welcome the change with open arms, others may be much more reluctant. It is important that thought is put into stakeholder engagement and communication planning. People may well have valid concerns about any kind of major change, and it is important that those concerns are heard and considered. Organizational communication often happens in an ad-hoc or haphazard way—it is worth spending time considering exactly what will be communicated, and when. The following questions can help:

- *Key Messages:* What are the key messages that need to be communicated?
- *Dates/Stages:* When does the information need to be released? How frequently do we need to communicate?
- *Purpose:* What is the purpose of the communication? Is it to engage, consult and solicit opinion, or inform?
- *Recipient:* What is the recipient group? Are they likely to be supportive? Might they have any preconceptions?
- *Tailored Content:* How do we tailor the content so it is meaningful for the recipient? How would we respond if the recipient asked “What's in it for me”? How will this change improve things for them? Are there any downsides? It is important to be as transparent and honest as practically possible.
- *Channel:* How will the communication take place (e.g. roadshow, email, video, webinar, workshop, meetings etc.)? What if somebody doesn't attend or doesn't read it? How will we ensure that everybody who needs to know will know?
- *Feedback:* How will we solicit, process, consider and acknowledge feedback? How will we ensure that the message is correctly understood

On top of regular formal communication, it can be useful to set up informal (and even anonymous) feedback mechanisms too. Additionally, it can be useful to identify a pool of ‘super-users’ who will act as advocates for the change and will help ensure that the roll-out goes as smoothly as possible.





## 7 Walking Away Too Soon

Last, but by no means least, it is important to ensure that process change is sustained. Implementing change and then walking away (expecting it to stick) is a recipe for disaster. Care must be put into planning the roll-out, considering the implementation approach. This involves considering whether to go for a ‘big bang’ or staged transition and whether or not to parallel run the existing process for a time. It also involves important decisions including whether or not to run a pilot, and if so for how long (and for how many transactions or customers). The answers to these questions will vary depending on the size of the change, the nature of the process and the risk involved. Yet it is important that they are consciously considered.

After the redesigned process is implemented, it is likely that some further optimization and tweaking will be required. It is important that these tweaks and changes are managed, and where appropriate, are adopted and communicated out. There may well be training that is necessary, and this is not just a ‘one-off’. It is important to consider how new members of staff will be trained, and whether any refresher training is required. Ensuring that the process artefacts themselves are stored in a common notation that is understood by the wider stakeholder community and stored in a common repository can help significantly. This provides a single ‘source of the truth’ that many people can refer to.

Once the process is fully implemented, it’s important that the change continues to be supported by the relevant managers, and also that the relevant teams keep a constant eye out for any external business environmental factors which may indicate that the process needs to change or adapt. If customers are suddenly unhappy with the time a process takes, this may be an indication that a customer has made a radical improvement—and we may need to follow suit (or find a different way of competing and differentiating our products and services). It is important that we don’t stand still, and that these factors continue to be fed back and considered.

## Conclusion

Process improvement initiatives can yield significant benefits, but there are pitfalls waiting for even the most experienced of process analysts. It is worth keeping the pitfalls mentioned in this article in mind—as well as keeping a vigilant eye open for any others that might be relevant for a specific project or initiative!

## References

Cadle, J., Paul, D. and Turner, P. (2014). Business Analysis Techniques. Swindon: BCS Learning & Development Limited.

IIBA, (2015). Guide to the business analysis body of knowledge. Toronto : Ontario: International Institute of Business Analysis.

## Further Reading

*Readers interested in the topics raised in this paper may find the following resources useful:*

Cadle, J., Eva, M., Hindle, K., Paul, D., Rollason, C., Turner, P., Yeates, D. and Cadle, J. (2014). Business Analysis. Swindon: BCS Learning & Development Limited.

Markey, R., Reichheld, F. and Dullweber, A. (2012). Closing the Customer Feedback Loop. Harvard Business Review, September 2012.

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Adrian Reed is a Consulting Lead Business Analyst who is passionate about the analysis profession. He is Principal Consultant and Director at Blackmetric Business Solutions ([www.blackmetric.co.uk](http://www.blackmetric.co.uk)), where he provides business analysis consultancy and training solutions to a range of clients in varying industries. He is also a director of the UK chapter of the International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA). Adrian is a true advocate of the analysis profession, and is constantly looking for ways of promoting the value that good analysis can bring.

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