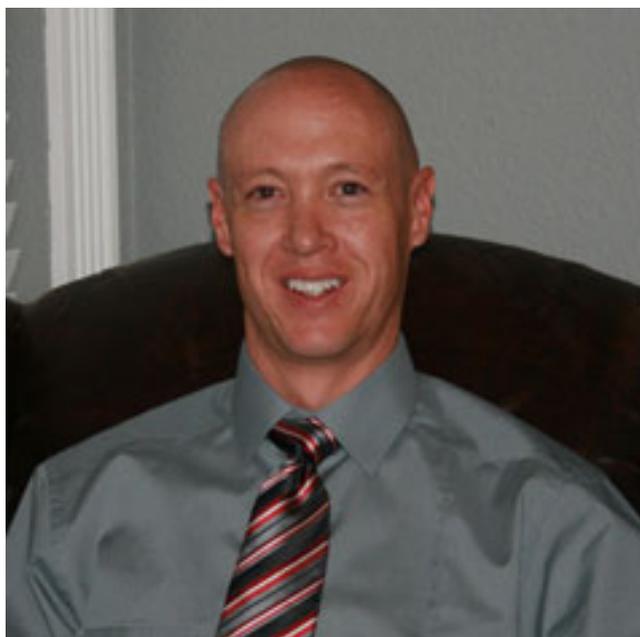


Solve Problems with Definitions, Part 2

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This is part two of a two-part piece. [Part one](#) can be found here [1]. [1]

A good problem definition has three parts. What is the problem? Where or when does it occur? How do you know? The answers to these three questions should consist of facts, not opinions or judgments. They should define a problem, not a solution.

The “how do you know” question is another opportunity to shortcut or solve a problem. Sometimes we don’t even know if we have a problem because we haven’t clearly defined what a good output looks like. Sometimes a simple measure or acceptance criteria is all that is required for everyone involved in the process to fulfill expectations. Solve the problem by clearly defining what the expectations are.

Sometimes a process is perceived to be problematic because it isn’t followed, or isn’t followed consistently the same way. In other words, have we clearly defined a process? If we want things done a certain way, we have to communicate or define that way.

Yes, process maps or work instructions have become our go-to solutions for defining processes, but that isn’t always necessary. If there are only three people responsible for a particular function, for example, and that function isn’t especially complicated, do those three people really need a detailed process map and set of work instructions, or do they just need to know how to produce a consistent output and how each does it is his or her own part?

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Maybe we just need a digital form to fill out and we don't need to map out a detailed process for how they procure or produce the information. Sometimes we just need some guidelines, not a whole process map. Defining guidelines and expectations for how particular calculations or estimations are conducted may be more important than drawing maps that show the step must occur. If we know what we are expected to produce, we don't always need to waste time drawing flow charts that show that those things get produced. We just need to fill in a blank.

Let's say that you do decide to participate in the improvement event in the scenario above, now that you have helped to define a purpose and goal for it. The team discovers that the process is already very clearly defined and carefully mapped, but the process steps aren't always done. Even a clearly defined process will fail if the roles and responsibilities of the people involved are not clearly understood.

Sometimes all that is necessary to fix a "broken" process is to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the people involved. Sometimes, a detailed process isn't necessary if the roles and responsibilities are clearly understood. Many quality, engineering, management, logistical, and other "office" type problems can be solved quickly with clearer role and responsibility definition.

Many of our problems and potentially broken processes can be fixed very easily and quickly by simply defining a few important elements. Misunderstanding can be the sole source of problems, particularly in office-type scenarios or processes, though also for production processes.

Before declaring a process improvement event and breaking out all of your tools and methods, do a concerted screen of the definitions involved:

1. Define what success looks like (so you can know if you even have a problem).
2. Define roles and responsibilities, and see if the process suddenly works after all.
3. Define guidelines and output formats to clarify procedural expectations.
4. Define the process or procedure if you want or need standardization.
5. Define the problem, if you actually have one, before trying to fix it.

Save yourself and your organization a great deal of process improvement exercise by making clear definitions. Solve many of your problems by providing missing definitions or by clarifying definitions. Stop the behavior of process-improvement-without-a-purpose by first defining the problem.

Misunderstanding is a very common cause for performance shortcomings. Use clarity of communication and clear definitions to eliminate the phenomenon of misunderstood expectations. It is often a simple and quick way to solve problems and save time and energy on lengthy process improvement events.

Stay wise, friends.

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To read part one of this two-part series, [please click here.](#) [1]What's your take? Please feel free to comment below! For more information, please visit www.bizwizwithin.com [2].

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