

## Process Maps – What are They?

08/15/05

Process maps? What are they? How do they get used in business? Aren't they a tool for much bigger businesses? How can they help my business? How do I build one? What do you recommend I do?

Process maps are drawings that represent the steps taken to perform an activity, or series of activities within an organization. They can be very simple – a few boxes, with arrows pointing from one box to the next – basically a flow chart. They can be very complex – layers of drawings, showing interconnected activities. Some are very artistic, some are very plain.

At their heart, process maps are communication tools, a written / diagrammatic statement of how you and your employees have agreed you will do things. By discussing the options, and agreeing, in writing, to a common way of performing, you and your employees increase cooperation, decrease conflict, and have a way to teach the next person. You also have defined a standard way of doing things, which you can use it to measure performance, and reward people or doing what you want –serving the customer in the most consistent, efficient, effective, profitable way possible. Maps are helpful in detecting imperfections, and identifying opportunities to improve: cut costs, deliver more

quickly, decrease errors, increase customer satisfaction.

Most large corporations consider process maps a necessary part of doing business. We, as entrepreneurs, can take a lesson from our big brothers in Corporate America, without getting overly caught up in bureaucratic practices. We can focus on the most critical functions in our operation, the things that impact the customer experience. We can use process maps as a vehicle to get everyone in the company involved.

Sometimes, when starting to process map, I hear things like, "I can't do that – every order, every service request I get is unique." Hardly. You just think of it that way. Try to look past the trees and see the forest. Look for major activities that you have to perform time after time. Start with those. Focus on what's common, rather than what's unique about each order.

To get started, put a big piece of flip chart paper on the wall. Pick a major process to work on. Identify the starting point, and the ending point. - try working on the actions taken, from the time the customer says, "go ahead", until the customer says, "I've got it, thank you," and you've received the check. Put several boxes on the paper, in-between the starting and ending points. Define the

major activity stages that those boxes might represent, e.g. take the order, produce the order, convey the outcome of the order to the customer, bill and collect. Define who is responsible for the successful outcome of each box, and put that person's name underneath the box.

In each box, write out bullets, indicating the activities that happen in that stage. List the people who perform each activity. Number each activity, in the order in which it should happen, from first to last. If you have a process that requires repeating, for instance, the customer calls in the middle to make a change, draw a line backwards, to an earlier stage, to indicate a repeat loop, and label the loop to show why it happened. Use a red marker to circle any stage that people disagree on how things are done, or where you want to indicate you've had repeated experience with breakdowns.

Treat this phase as the brainstorming stage, where every idea counts, no matter how odd-ball. Leave some magic markers behind, and encourage everyone in the company to add their 2 cents to the drawing. Use arrows to indicate the flow of activities and communication. Use different colors to indicate different areas of the company that get involved. Once the map gets too complicated, re-draw it, maybe

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even breaking it down into several drawings.

Hold meetings to discuss the best way to do things at each stage. Look for overlap, and disagreement – these are often sources of breakdown, when you're in full production. Hash it out, even if people have to compromise, and keep everyone focused on the objective – to define the most efficient, cost effective, customer oriented way of doing things.

Re-work the map, until you have a smooth process, which you believe is the most effective way of doing things. Ask someone to type the drawing up, using powerpoint, or another graphically oriented program. Distribute copies. Put them up on the wall. Ask everyone to become familiar with the way things are laid out. Test the process, by trying to adhere to it, in day-to-day activities. Have a discussion with everyone who touches the map, to see how things are going. Adjust the map, after working with it for a week or a month.

Looking for a good book? Try The Basics of Process Mapping, by Robert Damelio, or Process Mapping, Ways to Re-engineer your Business, by V. Daniel Hunt.

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