

The Secret to Unleashing an Unstoppable Improvement Culture

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Introduction

In a recent webinar, our CEO and founder, Ivan Seselj, explored why it's still the norm for organizations to fail at process improvement efforts. Read on for a summary of the webinar, and to learn how to create a successful culture of process improvement.

Improvement and change culture

Why is it that some organisations successfully do more with less – continually increasing their efficiency, improving productivity and outstripping the competition, while similar organisations in the same industry struggle? A focus on continuous improvement is often the reason. So how do you make sure your organisation has that focus, and advantage?

It all comes down to your culture. The dominant culture of an organisation has a huge impact on the success rate of any change initiative.

Generally human beings want to improve and make things better. The key is to normalise this behaviour - in other words, to make improvement your organisation's natural state.

"IF TEAMS ARE EXCITED, EMPOWERED AND MOTIVATED WITH A REAL DESIRE TO ACHIEVE, THEN THE SKY IS THE LIMIT."

If teams are excited, empowered and motivated with a real desire to achieve, then the sky is the limit. But if they are not engaged, if they feel powerless and lack the motivation to drive change, it's what we call a weak process culture.

Signs of a weak process culture

While every business is different, the signs of a weak process culture are the same. There will be little or no collaboration and engagement among employees, overall morale will be low, and you'll see high rates of failure in process and change initiatives.

This can become an ingrained problem. In companies with a weak process culture, teams will push back on change. You'll hear statements like "Trust me, I've been doing this job for twenty years, I don't need to write it down." No-one will be looking at or talking about process, and the general attitude towards process improvement and ownership will be one of inconvenience.

Causes of a weak process culture

1. Invisible leadership

The exec and the leadership team believe there is benefit to be gained from investment in ongoing improvement, but are not visible in their support (or worse - they verbalise support but deep down are dismissive of process, and consider it to be merely a compliance requirement).

2. Initiatives that disempower teams

When outside experts are brought in to change things, the true process owners, the people on the ground, are side lined. This can diminish confidence to collaborate and hinder innovation.

3. Loss of momentum

Projects start off with a big bang but things quickly revert to the old way of doing things and often any gains are lost.

4. Unhelpful process documentation

Pages and pages of process documents and charts that are complicated and indecipherable. If staff need help and can't immediately find it, it can kill engagement and weaken the brand of process.

5. Improvement in silent mode

Basically there is no acknowledgement of improvement efforts – no announcements, no KPI'S, no measures, no success celebration, no brand. If there is no inspiration to succeed, no kudos for success, teams cease to care.

If we visit a company website that isn't helpful, isn't easy to navigate and is pages and pages long, we just don't come back to it. We shouldn't expect attitudes to process guidance to be any different – if teams can't use it easily, then they won't use it at all.



How to make positive change go viral

You may recognize some of the above causes in your organisation, but the good news is that with the right foundations in place, weak process culture can be fixed.

Here are 5 key ingredients to unleash an unstoppable improvement culture:

1. Demonstrate active leadership

Get your leaders on board right from the beginning by demonstrating that there is an issue that needs addressing. Do whatever it takes to find that sore spot that makes the executive team sit up and take notice.

- Speak to them in their language, not just using numbers, but with evidence. Win their hearts. Show them a Facebook post written by a customer, give them evidence of a customer survey or share feedback from teams.
- Then get them out among the people, showing their support and celebrating successes. They need to be visibly committed. If they're not, everyone out there in the business can tell and will respond accordingly.
- Appoint a CPO (Chief Process Officer) and process champions. These are the leadership roles responsible for communicating the vision to the organisation. The champions set the standards and expectations and make sure the improvement opportunities are followed up on.

2. Empower the real process owners

Process ownership can be divided into two tiers – owners and experts. Process owners are the people who are ultimately responsible for the process operating effectively. Process experts are the people working on the ground with the processes. If they can work in tandem, processes will be kept up to date and any suggestions for improvements might actually be made, adding real value to the business.

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Updating a process needs to be easy. Name your owners and experts, then give them tools to make managing their processes easy. Set the expectation that change and improvement should be ongoing, continuing after projects have finished.

3. Sustain momentum – deploy ongoing structures

To ensure process improvement remains a day to day priority, set up a structure and a schedule for improving processes. Have a process forum and give it a name that resonates with people within your organisation. Once the system is in place it becomes easier for people to engage in these forums.

Hold improvement opportunity workshops regularly, and get your CPO to come along. Instead of making it feel like an audit or process review session, focus on problems, opportunities and customer satisfaction. Share ideas and get cross fertilisation happening across teams.

Often the idea that process owners in the business can change their own processes is met with fear. Quality or Improvement Managers worry that things may get out of control, ignoring the fact that those process owners are already doing things their own way to work around a process that no longer applies. Giving process owners more control merely formalises what is already happening – and, in fact, gives more transparency and control.

Everyone needs to participate in the discussion, everyone needs to be involved in the drive for incremental change, especially the process owners and experts.

4. Introduce helpful process guidance

If your process documentation isn't easy to use, change it. It should help teams get things right, learn new processes and give consistency across the organisation. Aim to provide information that explains the process so well, it's comprehensible (at a high level at least) in ten seconds. If it's easy to understand and easy to use, teams will go back to it again and again.

Make the information easy to access by embedding links into the places and tools that teams already use every day, so the information is available where and when they need it.

5. Sustain communication

Good communication is what it takes to get people involved and driving change. So how do you do it well?

The first, most important thing is to choose the right people to be your process champions. They can't be so senior that they're inaccessible, but they must know the people and processes inside out. Just be aware that if your champion leaves or is promoted, your process culture may be at risk.

Here are some other ways to make sure your communication supports an improvement culture:

- Celebrate successes – people love to be praised and are often more productive when their successes are recognised.

- Share information - send out automatic notifications of changes to processes to all stakeholders. A personal dashboard is a great way to share what's going on, what's coming up and what's out of date.
- Be interesting and interested. Make it personal and have fun by fostering the spirit of competition and holding team building exercises.
- Use discussion threads and 'like' buttons to make it easy for users to give feedback.

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The building blocks of improvement

For years the focus of process improvement efforts has been on tools and methodologies, at the expense of harnessing the real engine of change - engaged teams that are driven to improve and succeed.

With the building blocks for a strong improvement culture in place, your teams will feel more empowered to collaborate on improvement efforts. Engaged teams armed with the right attitude can take any tools and turn their efforts into real improvement for your customers and for your bottom line.

To watch the original webinar presentation please click play below.



About Promapp

At [Promapp](#), we believe that expressing and managing process knowledge simply is crucial to sustaining an on-going culture of process improvement. With Promapp's intuitive cloud-based application, used by over 300 organizations worldwide, anyone can create, navigate and change business processes.

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