How to Write Procedures to Increase Control

Procedures and Process Control

Why are you developing policies and procedures in the first place? Common answers include to:

1. Decrease training time.
2. Increase consistency.
3. Fulfill compliance requirements.
4. Present risks, hazards and lessons learned.
5. Communicate effectiveness measures.
6. Retain and transfer knowledge.
7. Document improvement and change.
8. Decrease error rate.
9. Simplify access to information.
10. Ease replication and growth.

Procedures and Management Control

Procedures are really about decreasing variability. As you decrease process variability you increase process control. Management control, process control, internal controls, or controlled outputs ~ policies and procedures provide the foundation for control that management wants and that regulators or auditors demand.

Compliance drives procedures. But compliance is a symptom not a cause. To get to the root cause of why we need procedures we need to look at what needs to be in control.

Processes, Procedures and Control

There are three types of processes that exhibit varying levels of control: ballistic process, controlled process and adaptive process. A ballistic process is the most common. Anytime you feel frustration and you have no way to provide any feedback to correct the problem you are encountering a ballistic process. Notice how we talk about process versus a procedure. That is because a process consists of one or more procedures. In the simple case a process may consist of only one procedure.

- Ballistic Process

The dictionary defines ballistic as *"characteristic of the motion of objects moving under their own momentum."* When used to describe a procedure or process it means that the procedure only cares about getting its own work accomplished and it is not interested in your input.

- Controlled Process

When we talk about control we do not mean as in dominance or power. Process control comes from systems theory *"where the inputs of the system are manipulated or transformed to realize an expected output of the system."* The key here is to

monitor the inputs and outputs and make corrective changes to the process in order to achieve the desired output or transformation of those inputs.

Obviously a ballistic process is easier to create and use. It requires a lot less work. With a controlled process, the key is to understand what is expected by the system.

- Adaptive Process

The ultimate process is one that learns. An adaptive process *"can change over time to improve effectiveness."* The idea is to review all the changes being made to the process. Are the right changes being made? Are enough changes being made? How has the environment changed? One must step back and look beyond the process.

Perhaps the learning methods employed are 20 years old and new methods have been invented or new technology has come out. Overtime, with enough input data and enough process changes we will eventually reach a limit to the process' effectiveness. The changes will become so incremental that they may not be worth the effort to change. In this case it is time to adapt or evolve to a new state.

This is not change for change's sake. We need to look at methods and technology that can improve the process effectiveness. This may include an entire redesign. One must be open to new ideas at this stage and not dogmatically cling to the old ways if you can demonstrate that the new ideas are more effective. As you might expect, an adaptive process is the hardest to create.

Management Systems Control

Organizations are systems that require systems controls. A ballistic process is about dominance. A controlled process is about achieving an expected outcome. But the adaptive process is about the future, achieving an expected vision for your organization, and delivering the ultimate control management is really seeking.

Which kind of processes are you building when you write your procedures?

Management wants to improve their control over a condition that they are unhappy about. The only problem is that the procedures they commission to write only describe an existing bad condition. They end up ballistic. In order to really improve the condition one must understand the system, expected outcomes, and have good data describing the condition. Only then can we actually improve the condition.

Writing a Procedure

If you have been tasked to write a procedure, break the process into four parts: Discovery, Design, Development and Deployment.

Procedure Discovery

Discovery means understanding the problem, the system the procedure interfaces with, and the requirements imposed on the process that the procedure describes. A procedure is needed to describe one or more steps to a business process. So, before

we start writing the procedure, we need to discover what is expected from the procedure and or the process.

During discovery we need to understand:

1. Who are the **sources/resources** and what do they supply to the process?
2. What are the **inputs** and what **outputs** are they transformed into?
3. Who are the **customers** and what do they receive from the process?
4. What are the **effectiveness criteria** or how do we know if the process is working correctly?
5. What **corrective action** is taken when the process does not work correctly?

The main idea is to understand the **flow of information**, what happens and why. With this information in hand we are ready to begin designing the procedure.

Procedure Design

The design phase is really where we need to spend our time if you want to develop a really good procedure. Given the discovery information you should create a process map showing the steps to the process and what inputs and outputs are produced along the way.

A process map will help communicate procedure design and collect feedback before we write out the procedure's text. Use a process flow diagram. On the left are the inputs, on the right are the outputs and in the middle are the process steps. For each process step the specific inputs and outputs should be listed. You can also list the sources and customers for each to make a more complete diagram.

The last step in design is to perform a design review or walk-through of the draft procedure before you document it in writing. Check each input, output and procedure step to ensure you have not forgotten anything.

Plan Do Check Act (PDCA)

Use PDCA to review the procedure. It's an acronym for Plan Do Check Act; one of the review criteria is to verify that the procedure exhibits the process approach. A good procedure would use the process approach for continuous improvement.

With the basic design in place, you are ready to begin development and write out the procedure.

Developing/Writing Procedures

During discovery, your main goal is to understand the flow of information which, in turn, will tell you what is expected from the procedure or the process.

In the design phase, you create a process map which shows the steps, inputs and outputs of the process. A design review or procedure walk-through prior to development ensures that the procedure is accurate and can be used effectively.

The important question to answer in development is who are the users of the procedure going to be? Are they **novices, occasional users, or frequent users?**

You can write the procedure for all three or determine that only a certain group is going to use it. The editorial style is different for each.

Procedures for Frequent Users

Frequent users are expected to be experienced. They do not require a lot of explanation, technical definitions or detailed step-by-step instructions. Frequent users may only need a checklist. They will skim the procedure and rely on the headlines for each major task to skip through. Therefore, the **headlines, sub-heads, and checklists** are the most important point for the frequent users. The priority is **navigation** more than explanation.

Procedures for Occasional Users

Occasional users are not experienced. They may only use the procedure now and then, when they fill-in for someone or perhaps the procedure is only used once a month. So, the occasional user needs what the frequent user needs but they also may require explanation or a reminder as to **how and why** this step is done. Therefore, **explanations are important** to the occasional user. The priority is explanation and navigation over detailed step-by-step instructions.

Procedures for Novices

Novices are learning the procedure for the first time and need **step-by-step instructions**. These are sometimes called “work instructions” and compose them as a separate document referenced from within the procedure. The reason is obvious; you don’t want to overload the procedure with a lot of detailed instructions that may only be used by a novice once in a long while. Therefore, detailed **work instructions are important** to the novice. The **priority is learning the procedure** and transforming the novice into an occasional user.

You need to perform a review of the written procedure. Use the “seven C’s” review and check a procedure for **Context, Consistency, Completeness, Control, Compliance, Correctness,** and **Clarity**. After the document review, you are ready to deploy the procedure into the work group.

Procedure Deployment

Deployment refers to the training, auditing and continuous improvement of the procedure. Training is the first step; the users need to be introduced to the procedure and how it is used. Most procedures have a form, checklist, or log of some kind that embodies the procedure. The users need to be introduced to what the inputs and outputs are and how they will be audited for conformance.

Procedure Auditing

Why do we audit procedures? First, to see if they are used, but more importantly, it's to see if data is collected, used and changes are occurring to the process (via revisions to the procedure), demonstrating that the **process is in control**.

Who are Procedures Written For?

Procedures are written for various user-groups: **frequent users, occasional users, or novices**, in order for them to consistently realize the process that the procedure models. Procedures are written for **auditors** to verify to **management** that the processes are in control. And, procedures are written for the **department** to ensure that the department is continuously improving, realizing the business objectives.

What's a Policy?

A policy is a guiding principle used to set direction in an organization. It can be a course of action to guide and influence decisions. It should be used as a guide to decision making under a given set of circumstances within the framework of objectives, goals and management philosophies as determined by senior management.

There are really two types of policies. The first are **rules** frequently used as employee policies. The second are **mini-mission statements** frequently associated with procedures. Think rules versus missions.

Employee Policies

An employee policy is a business rule included in the Employee Handbook. This includes business practices like dress codes, vacation policy, codes of conduct, etc. Employee policies are human resources policies used to support management philosophies, to set a standard for projecting our image, and/or to communicate regulations that apply to all personnel.

Procedure Policies

Think of your procedure policy as a **mini-mission statement**. A mission statement contains the target user, the stated purpose, and some type of effectiveness measure to communicate how users know the procedure is working.

An example is an Inventory Counting Procedure **Policy:**

Warehouse personnel shall count physical inventory on a frequent basis to ensure the accuracy of the general ledger balance.

In the inventory counting policy you see the target user is the warehouse personnel. The **stated purpose** is to count inventory and the **effectiveness measures** are frequency and accuracy. The procedures will need to define the actual frequency and accuracy amounts. In fact, the amounts could be **objectives for process improvement** if there are inventory issues.

SUMMARY

What is a Procedure?

A procedure is a **particular way of accomplishing something**. It should be designed as a series of steps to be followed as a consistent and repetitive approach or cycle to accomplish an end result. Once complete, you will have a set of established methods for conducting the actions of your organization, which will come in handy for training, process auditing, process improvement or compliance initiatives.

Procedures provide a platform for implementing the consistency needed to decrease process variation, which increases procedure control. Decreasing process variation is how we eliminate waste and increase performance.

The Difference between Policies and Procedure

A policy is a guiding principle used to set direction in an organization. A procedure is a series of steps to be followed as a consistent and repetitive approach to accomplish an end result. Together they are used to empower a process with the direction and consistency necessary for successful process improvement.

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