

Alphabet Soup

By Martin VanDerSchouw

ITIL, Six Sigma, Lean, TQM, Agile Development, Scrum, XP, APM, PMBOK, strategy maps, and portfolio management the list goes on and on. How does anyone make sense of all the management mantras? The reality is that most do not. The average organization will attempt to implement three of these, or other management techniques, every two years. Each initiative will cost approximately U.S. \$750,000 and will be cancelled within 12 months. Yet, the management problems these ideas were undertaken to solve will continue.

As an organizational leader tirelessly attempting to keep your firm moving forward, reduce costs, improve customer satisfaction, retain your most valuable employees twenty other major strategic and operational goals what are you to do? The key to wading through the myriad of mantras is to keep your focus on what really matters. Remembering a few simple rules can dramatically improve your chances of success. Firstly, process won't get you there, people will. And secondly, strategy drives your success.

In almost every situation, the first thing a new leader instinctively wants to do when they walk in the door is change something. They cannot help themselves. It's the simple logic of self preservation. In most situations, the new leader is replacing a leader that was dismissed from the organization. If they keep everything the same, logic dictates they will end up in the same position as the previous leader. Therefore, the only logical course is to change something, put the leader's imprint on the organization. For many leaders this leads to some sort of process.

Six Sigma, Lean, Agile Six Sigma or TQM are all examples of continuous process improvement initiatives. Agile Development and specifically Scrum, Extreme Programming (XP), Agile Project Management (APM) or Crystal Clear are all represent popular information technology development methodologies. The Project Management Body of Knowledge or PMBOK represents the writings for the field of project management consolidated in the Project Management Institute's PMBOK Guide®. Finally, strategy maps and the like are best expressed by the work of Robert S. Kaplan. Each of these represents a process that an organization might select to try and change current performance. The numbers say most will fail. However, it is the reason for failure that is important.

In most cases, when a leader brings a new process to the organization they achieve a reasonable amount of initial success. Everyone seems on board with the new processes. Meetings are being scheduled and attended according to the plan. There is apparent energy and excitement with the initial results. Then somewhere around months six through nine the wheels seem to fall off. Those once grand processes are no longer being followed without constant reminders. The once promising investment is simply not paying dividends. Is this a failure of process? Maybe it is a problem with you people. You simply have the wrong people in the wrong jobs. The truth is it's a failure of leadership, yours. Unless you correct the problem quickly you are going to become part of the ever increasing list of failures.

The problem in these situations is too heavy a reliance on detailed process, and too little attention being paid to your staff taking ownership of the initiative.

If you have ever read anything on change management or taken any training on the topic you have likely learned about the supposed importance of buy-in. Getting buy in is a great idea if you are a change consultant, but fails miserably for organizational leaders in the real world. The problem comes from understanding what buy-in truly represents. Buy-in is the leader selling organizational members the leader's ideas for how the organization should be run or changed. The problem with buy-in is that the buyer can always choose to buy-out. This occurs when the change is no longer new, cool or sexy. It also happens when team members feel they have become bogged down in process and can no longer remember why the process was created in the first place. Two things have to occur to resolve this problem. First, leaders must ensure focus is always on the end goal. This requires constant reminders. Secondly, leaders must ensure the process does not become rote and overly cumbersome. A good process should NEVER try to account for every contingency. The target of a good process is to account for 90% of the cases and then give your people the latitude to deal with the last 10%. Remember, the tendency of most people is to keep their heads down assuming that if they do not get noticed the change initiative will eventually lose steam and they can go back to doing things the way they always have. People do this because they have no ownership in the idea. It's your idea so when they get tired or frustrated it is easy to revert back to the old ways.

The key to instilling a sense of ownership is understanding the relationship strategy has in the process. Strategy represents the plan created achieve the long range organizational objectives. For many leaders, strategy is their domain. It is not the domain of the average worker. Unfortunately, this opinion ensures the strategy is never achieved. The true objective of an organizational strategy is to loudly and clearly state, "this is who we are and where we are going." Every member of the organization must feel a sense of ownership in the strategy and be able to express how their personal actions impact the strategy. In other words, they must be able to answer the question, "How do I fit in?" This cannot be done by having the senior leadership hand down the strategy from on high.

True leaders understand the importance of getting every member of the team to take ownership of their actions and the strategy. This requires more than an alphabet soup of process, it requires an owned strategy