Redesigning Office/Service Process Requires
A Cross-Functional Team…That Includes HR

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For a long time, process redesign consisted of process experts reviewing work; going away and redesigning the work; then returning to tell workers how to work. But that was in the days when concern for process was limited to manufacturing, where rote workers did what they were told. True, manufacturing workers no longer bow down and accept orders the way they used to—but an even bigger shift from then to now is the evolving business process focal point.

The shift to customer-driven process

With manufacturing process largely addressed (for better or for worse), process attention is shifting from production to front and back offices plus service companies. Why does this matter?

First, because office/service settings (the O/S) largely determine how companies interact with customers, which creates the customer experience. And improving process to optimize customer experience, now called "Outside-In," requires replacing traditional company-centric goals with customer goals, a huge transition for the process industry.

Second, because O/S environments include high percentages of knowledge workers, who show less than military discipline when told to do this or that (and I'm not just referring to sales and marketing folks). Process experts who try telling knowledge workers how to work aren't very expert. In fact, as often as not they'll get their heads handed to them on

silver platters for their efforts. Worse yet, internal process people, usually business analysts, have no business trying to lead organizational change triggered by both O/S process change and shifts towards customer-centricity.

Redesigning O/S process requires organizational change

O/S process involves multiple functions and disciplines interacting with each other to accomplish work—not an assembly line but an often variable network of crisscrossing lines that can't be changed in one place without changing work elsewhere. And it takes a bare modicum of changing work before starting to change who does what work. Then the fun begins. Changing the who and the what requires organizational change—which ranges in scope from reallocating work on the low impact end to eliminating entire functions and changing reporting responsibilities on the other. And speaking of potential disruption, on average HYM's process redesign engagements produce a 20% reduction in FTE requirements (while improving customer experience and work quality both). However, barring mass firings, companies can't get "from here to there" without designing change in cross-functional teams to build internal support and mitigate resistance—while also generating more insight than any process "expert" can glean from interviewing and observing how work flows.

Ah, yes. But who's supposed to lead these teams?

Here's where HR comes into play

Should HR play a role? Depends on who you talk to. Lots of line managers have it in for HR for "creating silly rules"—never mind they're likely compliance-driven and hardly optional. Others have no use for a profession that addresses "touchy-feely" people issues. And some blame HR for staffing levels, salaries and "lost" promotion opportunities. So HR often becomes a whipping boy.

But smarter managers understand that O/S work, especially the customer-affecting activities, is surrounded by context—and successfully changing O/S work requires understanding the big picture. Plus, many totally get the danger of forming cross-functional teams to be led by someone with functional skin in the game—as in, "Hey, let's let IT lead." Or, "Let's let marketing lead." Wrong.

Looking across the company topography, what entity better understands the organizational context, including relationships and reporting lines, than HR? And what other entity can stay functionally neutral and objective? And to help make the case for HR, students in more recent HR graduate programs are required to learn organizational design and dynamics. Plus many veteran HR managers have taken it upon themselves to acquire these skill sets, if they didn't have them already.

Is HR a good fit?

But does the HR hand fit neatly inside this process and change management glove—even to the point of providing internal leadership for process redesign initiatives? Not always. Many HR professionals are justifiably wary of getting their fingers bitten off. Guiding change can get very nasty, very quickly—especially when some puffed up VP Marketing fears giving up direct reports and responsibility for customer experience to the process or quality function, a trend that's starting. Hey, don't companies calculate VP office space by number of direct reports? Only kidding.

Even with organizational design training, most HR managers do lack process experience. But here's a little secret. Process professionals (and I'll acknowledge some guilt here) take their profession and their knowledge so seriously they continually obfuscate the whole subject of process.

Boiling O/S process down to essentials

If you strip away all process-speak, process-symbology, process statistics (that are barely relevant in the O/S)—process design boils down to a short list of necessary skills.

- Willingness to look beyond the way things are to what they could be
- Objectivity that filters out any favoritism among the functional players
- Rational thinking to diagnose cause & effect
- Intuition to spot connectivity and ferret out problems
- Tolerance of conflict that will inevitably occur
- Leadership and "command presence" to prevent being rolled
- Ability to recruit a C-level executive to watch the process leader's back

How many of these skills require specialized process training? None. Now, HR managers not process-trained should engage an objective outside consultant experienced in spotting opportunities and solving problems before undertaking an O/S process redesign initiative on their own. Nonetheless, leading O/S process change initiatives takes skillful and resourceful people more than process-nerds.

Shifting focus from employees to customers

Most HR professionals are people persons. Just as they relate to employees, they can also relate to customers. And because today's process is increasingly customer-driven, that's essential.

Traditionally, process has focused on quality and efficiency for internal gain. But in the O/S, especially today as customers are becoming more and more empowered, process must focus on delivering new benefits to customers. And identifying means to generate this value requires process designers to "find their inner customers" so they can empathically understand customers' perspectives as well as see beyond what customers are asking for or expecting today. That's innate to the person, not an acquired skill. And HR people are more likely to possess this trait than say, marketers, who are accustomed to pushing and persuading customers to do the company's bidding rather than seeing through customer eyes or standing in customer shoes—or sales people who often view customers as objects whose cooperation is required to generate sales commissions (okay, a bit harsh).

Entry points for HR

Despite all the arguments favorable to engaging HR in O/S process change, few senior execs will hand them leadership assignments based on suppositions. HR leaders first need to prove their process mettle, and there's no place to start like home.

Even today, most HR departments operate inefficiently (and often ineffectively) due to bad work design. Several of our clients have made their process mark by redesigning and automating hiring practices from recruitment on through—and then integrating hiring data into their main HRIS (human resources information system). In more than one case that involved minimizing hiring managers' role to only what added value to them, preserving their input while lifting considerable work off them (of course, some bitched anyway at

having anything taken away from them). We even had a manufacturing client a few years back with highly fluctuating production needs that required furloughing and rapid rehiring of their workforce for economic survival. Here, HR was the crux of the company, and after we helped HR design an effective approach to workforce management, no one doubted their process acumen going forward.

Within the hiring process, the act of interviewing candidates itself is a process minefield where mis-designed methods are land mines waiting for EEOC (federal non-discrimination regulator) detection. While designing and enforcing in-compliance process has given some managers temporary heartburn, at the same time it's left an "HR knows what it's doing" impression on these folks—as in I trust them to get involved in my function's process.

Within the HR bailiwick, training can also provide the foot that gets HR in the process door. We worked with a financial services client several years back where training took to process so readily the department head wound up in charge of process enterprise-wide—a responsibility she acquitted very well with across the board respect from both management and staff.

Should HR professionals go there?

Some HR managers may prefer not to venture out into the world of process. But others, especially those itching for more direct involvement in line business decisions, opportunities like this don't grow on trees. Plus, in most companies taking charge of O/S process means moving into a vacuum rather than pushing another function aside. Is there risk? Of course there is. All opportunities for gain carry a risk of loss. But in this case, the risk factor doesn't scale up to the opportunity.

Bold and strong HR people can and should pick up the O/S process mantle. And all managers concerned about customers and customer experience should encourage HR's participation.

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