



BPM by any other name

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet.”

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *ROMEO AND JULIET*, ACT II, SCENE I

What’s in a name?

Not so much? What is important is what we mean and understand by the thing that is named. Shared understanding is everything; without understanding, there is no effective communication.

If we begin with unknown differences in the way we visualize and name basic concepts, there is no way we can converge on common understandings and develop sophisticated models of how the organizational world works. And without that we have no chance of creating a systemic approach to delivering sustained improvement in organizational performance in mindfully targeted ways.

While the nature of an object is more important than what we call it, the language we use can be a powerful force for understanding, as well as for misunderstanding.

When it comes to gaining a shared understanding in BPM and related areas, we are too often ‘separated by a common language’.

Without understanding, we can’t even have rational conversations about our different views. Without effective communications there can be no performance improvement.

Not business. Not process. Not management.

In a recent edition of the [Process Pioneer podcast](#) a participant asked for advice about what to do in an organization where BPM was a term that just didn’t work.

The organization did not think of itself as a *business*. Senior executives did not like the idea of *process* – surely processes are things that stop us getting good work done. And we are already doing *management* very well, thanks!

A seemingly arid field for business process management.



The term I prefer and find more meaningful is *process-based management*. It says what we mean to do and avoids the BPM acronym which has many different meanings across a range from software to management philosophy.

“Process-based management” solves the genuine problem of organizations with a strong social purpose not wanting to operate, or be thought of, as a “business”. The other two stumbling blocks remain.

And that’s quite a challenge. When what we are trying to evangelize is process-based management, it’s more than a little difficult to avoid the term “process management”.

We must be able to have open and meaningful conversations about business processes throughout the organization.

Modeling communications

Many models of communications have been suggested over millennia, including an early entry from Aristotle in the fourth century BC. Most of these models include some form of the elements: sender, message, media, and receiver.

In all models it is clear that each element must be carefully considered, designed, and implemented. In considering this in practice the aphorism “*if the student fails to learn, the teacher fails to teach*”¹ is instructive for us all, if more than a little daunting.

So, we clearly need to consider the receivers of our message. If they don’t understand the language, if the message doesn’t resonate for them, they will not understand – and worse yet, will stop listening.

Discussions with the Executive Committee therefore need to be about customers, risks, costs, resilience, compliance – issues that fill the agendas of executives. There needs to be a compelling reason for them to even listen, let alone act.

Discussions with workers on the “shop floor” need to have a much more practical and operational focus. Almost everyone comes to work intending to a good (or at least reasonable) job. In doing so they likely often come across activities that shouldn’t be so difficult. This is fertile ground for “making stuff work better” (aka process improvement).

¹ Sidney Sugarman. (n.d.). AZQuotes.com. Retrieved April 30, 2023, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/735820>.

Away from the executive suite we can expect increased anxiety about job cuts. This must be faced as openly and honestly as possible. Many people, and too many organizations, simplistically interpret process improvement as *“reduce the workforce by 30%”*.

To engage any group in thinking and acting in quite different ways, we must think about the messages (keeping in mind that silence can also be a powerful, even if unintended, message), speak a language that has meaning for that audience, and use appropriate communications channels.

The p word

To communicate effectively we need to use the language of the audience. That’s clear. But it’s also clear that whatever words we use we are still talking about processes. The dreaded p word can’t be avoided forever.

We can have a different language for communication with different groups in our organization. We could talk to executives about, say, risk. Maybe talk to operational people about solving problems. The sales team might like to hear about improvements in delivery speed. Procurement people will be interested in ways to achieve better policy compliance. Etc. Etc.

Then, inevitably, one day they are all in the same meeting. All of the separate improvement opportunities are still valid but we have no common language. We’ve failed to nurture collaborative behaviors focused on optimizing value creation across the end-to-end *process*.

We can’t create a culture of process-based management through a regime of siloed targets defined using unfamiliar dialects.

Yes, we do need compelling reasons to even start the process journey and these drivers need to resonate at all levels. But ultimately all of those involved in value delivery across the end-to-end process need a shared language.

Our goal must be *performance without borders*.

Breaking through the communications barrier

“We aren’t a business. We don’t like processes. We already do management. Don’t talk to us about BPM. We are too busy trying to execute our strategy and improve organizational performance to be worried about processes.” said way too many management decision makers.

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That's a bit of an exaggeration but does summarize the core arguments against the active management of business processes. In a previous paper I spoke of *Process Reluctance Syndrome* as the hidden malady that may be the largest opportunity cost in any organization.

The communication problem is brought into sharp relief by our managers saying they are too busy with strategy execution and performance improvement to worry about processes when we process practitioners are saying that processes execute strategy and improve performance.

For everyone's benefit we need to break through this communications barrier.

Here are some ways to do that.

Value

Each decision maker – and they aren't all in the executive suite – must have a compelling reason for starting, and continuing, the process journey. It's Selling 101 to identify the value proposition. Be a solution, not a new problem.

Deliver

There's no doubt that the best way to sell the ideas of process-based management is to make the benefits obvious by delivering them. And having done so, make sure everyone knows. Run a continuous internal marketing program.

Incremental

Settle down. You can't do it all at once. Big bangs can be destructive. When starting out, pick just two or three processes and use those to demonstrate success. Choose wisely. Don't select trivial processes or the most complex. It's success we mean to demonstrate.

Clean language

Be as clear as possible in the language used. Define the key terms lucidly. Keep it simple – eliminate the synonyms. Document and publish the glossary of process terms. Create the habit of using the right language in the correct context.

Focus

The classic aphorism well-loved of process practitioners should guide all we do – *the vital few and the trivial many* (and its many variations). Select the vital few processes, process KPIs, and PKPI targets. Focus on the vital few decision makers and influencers. We have limited resources to apply to an effectively infinite space, so use them wisely.

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And...

And did I mention deliver, deliver, and deliver the value you promised and make sure everybody knows how it was done and where to get help to replicate that success.

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