



Processes -v- People

Organisational agility is being promoted as the ‘silver bullet’ to create value and eliminate project failures, but decades of research show that methodologies, standard operating procedures and organisational maturity are essential underpinnings of consistent success.

Are these mutually exclusive propositions or is there a more subtle answer to this apparent contradiction?



“Would you say this guy is a rigid thinker?”

The starting point for this discussion is decades of research looking at various maturity models ranging from the old CMM (now CMMI) to PMI’s OPM3. The consistent findings are that investing in creating organisational maturity demonstrates a strong ‘return on investment’. Developing and using a pragmatic methodology suited to the needs of the organisation reduces failure, increases value generation, and outcomes become more

consistent and predictable. These findings are supported with studies in the quality arena, including ‘Six Sigma’ that consistently show that good ‘standard operating procedures’ (SOP) reduce undesirable variability and enhance quality.

However, given that every methodology consists of a series of SOPs where’s the room for agile? We suggest you can get the best of both worlds by embedding organisational agility into your procedures, methodologies and management.

Standard Operating Procedures¹

Getting your SOPs ‘right’ is a good starting point. SOPs should define and assist in the performance of standard processes that project teams have to perform routinely and should provide templates, guidelines and other elements designed to make doing the task easier and quicker. Key success factors to ensure that process performers use SOPs appropriately are:

- They need to know there is a SOP and when they need to apply it;
- SOPs need to be easy to locate when they perform their task;
- The SOP must be in the right format and meaningful to the process performer;
- The information must be accurate and up to date;
- The SOP must reflect the current work practices: the what – the how – the why;

¹ For more on **SOPs** see:

http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1086_Standard_Operating_Procedures.pdf





- The SOP must be 'lean' and 'light' and scalable so it is fit for use in different circumstances;
- The SOP must demonstrate a clear purpose and benefit (time saving, quality, safety, etc);
- The SOP must be seen to be used by the leaders;
- Every SOP needs to be consistent across the organisation;
- The process performer must have the opportunity to comment or improve the SOP embedding lessons learned and 'agility' in the process.

To achieve these objectives, organizations must create intrinsic linkages between process, people, systems and knowledge so that SOPs are generated, managed and disseminated from a central repository to the right process performers in the right format. In an agile world much is repeated in every sprint, SOPs can provide the agenda and rules for the 'daily stand-up meetings' as well as dealing with opening and closing a sprint, documenting user stories, etc.

The enemy of useful SOPs is a dictatorial unit focused on imposing its view of how work should be performed in a bureaucratic and dogmatic way.

Flexible Methodologies²



Methodologies combine various SOPs and other requirements into a framework focused on achieving project success. A good methodology must also be '*lean and light*³' and scalable so it is fit for use in different circumstances. Every project undertaken by an organisation is by definition unique, therefore the methodology used by the organisation must allow appropriate flexibility in the way the methodology is used - one size does not 'fit all', ever!

The first paragraph in section 1.1 of the *PMBOK® Guide* gets this right 'Good practice does not mean that the knowledge described should always be applied uniformly to all projects; the organisation and/or the project management team is responsible for determining what is appropriate for any given project.' A good methodology incorporates agility by including processes for scaling and adjusting the methodology so it is adapted to be fit for purpose on each project.

Management agility

The final element in blending agility with sensible processes is an agile approach to management, but agility and anarchy are not the same:

- Anarchy = no processes;
- Agility = the flexibly application of the right processes to achieve success.

² For more on **methodologies** see:

http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1045_Methodologies.pdf

³ For more on '**lean and light**' see:

http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1046_Process_Improvement.pdf



The so-called military doctrine of ‘command and control’ embedded in ‘Scientific Management’ assumes, amongst other things, that ‘*supervision must be achieved through a clear chain of command and through the application of impersonal rules*’ and that ‘*only those at the top have the capacity and opportunity to direct the enterprise*’. This outdated philosophy has been strongly criticised for more than 50 years by management thinkers ranging from Deming⁴ to Drucker⁵ and has not been military doctrine since the middle of the 19th century.

The concept of ridged process-oriented command and control structures was quickly replaced by the concept of ‘auftragstaktik’, or directive command in the Prussian army following their defeat by Napoleon at the battles of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806.

The core concept of auftragstaktik is ‘bounded initiative’. Provided people within the organisation hierarchy have proper training and the organisational culture is strong, the leader’s role is to clearly outline his/her intentions and rationale. Once this is understood, subordinate personnel can formulate their own plan of action for the tasks they are allocated and design appropriate responses to achieve the leader’s objectives based on their understanding of the actual situation.

For example, a General may wish to defend a city, a Brigade Commander defend his designated sector and within the sector, a Platoon Commander may be tasked with establishing a road block which involves one of his NCOs establishing a strongpoint. The General does not need to instruct the NCO on how to site the strong point, camouflage it or man it. But the process is not random, Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) define how each specific task should be accomplished and ‘bounded initiative’ allows the individual leader to optimise the SOP for the specific circumstances he or she encounters to best support the overall intent of the commander.

Generalfeldmarschall Helmuth von Moltke who was the chief of staff of the Prussian Army for thirty years from 1857 believed in detailed planning and rigorous preparation but also accepted change was inevitable ‘*no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force*’. Projects are no different! Both the methodology and the project management plan need to encourage ‘bounded agility’ to lock in opportunities and mitigate problems. Effective military leaders were doing this more than 150 years before the Agile Manifesto was published, its time for project management to catch up and allow their team to help drive success!

How much ‘bounded initiative’ does your methodology allow???

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⁴ W. Edwards Deming’s 5 deadly sins of American management includes #5 ‘*the use of visible figures only, for management – little consideration is given to measures that are unknown and unknowable*’. And ‘*Quality is everyone’s responsibility*’.

⁵ Peter F Drucker; ‘*So much of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to work*’.