Processes: How We Do What We Do...How to Begin

Kathryn LeRoy, Ph.D.
Chief Quality and Improvement Officer
Fort Bend ISD

Educators plan, implement, monitor, and continuously strive to increase student learning and achievement. However, the term *process* rarely describes what takes place in every classroom every day or the day-to-day operations of a school district.

In the early stages of using the Criteria for Performance Excellence to move from a "system of schools" to a "school system", senior leaders make a commitment to support the integration of the system, strive to understand the key requirements of customers, and develop a plan to meet those requirements and the challenges facing the organization. However, accomplishment of a strategic plan depends on an engaged and capable work force, key measures to chart progress along the way, and well-deployed, systematic, integrated processes that the organization consistently analyzes and shares across work units.

Category 6 of the Criteria, Process Management, asks, "What are your key processes?" So what is a process? What is process management? What does that look like in K-12 education? Without writing a book, which could be done, let's take a brief look at definitions, an example of how one school district identifies, analyzes, improves, and monitors key processes, and the first steps of that process management methodology.

Every one of us interacts with and works within processes each day. Processes develop by design or by default. We often do not notice a process until things go wrong or workflow does not function smoothly. Simply stated: A process is a series of tasks or activities that takes an input (those things needed to do a job), modifies the input (work takes place and/or value is added), and produces an output (service or product). Identifying every organizational or individual processes may be noble, but is not the goal or particularly practical. However, those processes that critically affect success should be the primary focus. A critical process is essential to the accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives.

Why are processes important? They are a major component of any organization. A process –focused organization can use process analysis to diagnose all types of problems. Why is process management important? Most organizational problems have their root cause in a process. W. Edwards Deming attributed over 95% of all problems to the processes in place. Organizations can manage work much more effectively and efficiently through a process mindset.

Where and how do you begin process management? Fort Bend ISD has adopted a methodology (Figure 1) based on the concepts and tools of Total Quality Management, Continuous Quality Improvement, and the work of Dr. Deming.

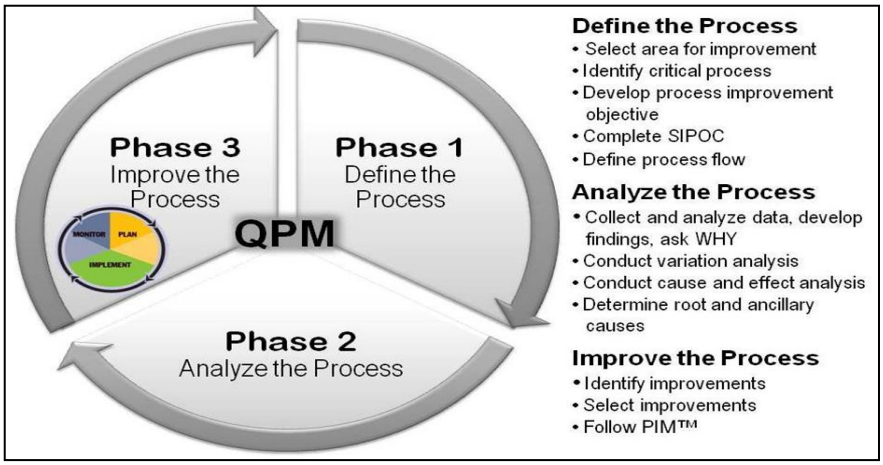

Figure 1: Quality Process Management (QPM)

Managing processes begins with first defining the process. Once we are clear about the process we want to improve, we analyze the process to understand what is working within each process step and what is not. Finally, we begin improving the process by identifying possible solutions to implement, monitoring those solutions, and evaluating the effectiveness of the improvement effort.

Phase 3 establishes a system of continuous improvement through measurement and feedback mechanisms. In this phase, the district's PDSA model (PIM™) ensures continuous cycles of refinement and improvement of the critical process.

The Plan, Implement, Monitor (PIM)^2 Continuous Improvement Process (Figure 2) continues the work completed in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Quality Process Management methodology. Without a means to conduct ongoing cycles of improvement, processes can revert to being static, unchallenged, and ultimately unmanaged.

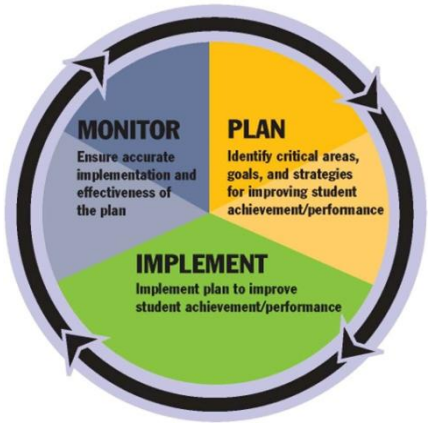

Figure 2: PIM™ Continuous Improvement Process

Phase I begins by identifying an area for improvement. The following questions serve as a guide to identifying processes to improve:

- What is not working in your area?
- What process or processes are broken?
- What are some of the most important (critical) processes in your area?
- How do you know something needs fixing?

- Do you know how those processes are doing?
- If you do know, how do you know?
- What do you look for to verify that the process is working as designed?
- What are some of the symptoms that you might notice when a process fails or is not as efficient as it could be?

Do any of the following describe the symptoms you see or experience?

- Customers (internal or external receivers of the process) are unhappy
- Some things just take too long
- We Throw people or money at the problem and it still does not improve
- Too many reviews and sign-offs
- High frustration while working
- The process wasn't done right the first time
- Processes span several departments, and there is finger-pointing and blame
- No one seems to take ownership of the total process

From this list, you may have identified a number of symptoms to address. As you consider your day-to-day work, what could make things run more smoothly and efficiently? What are effective areas that can be even better? Where are breakdowns and delays? What is inefficient? Where is there a great deal of variation and inconsistency? If there are several areas or processes, which can make the most difference if we make improvements now?

When selecting your first, or any, process to improve, you should consider these important points. Does the process have a direct impact on improving service, production, and the work of employees. If it does not, this may not be a critical process, and you and the team may spend hours on improving something that has little to do with meeting your goals or successfully meeting the needs of the organization or customers.

Is this process one that most employees agree is important to the organization (department) and the customers of the product or services? If not, the team will not take the improvement seriously or recognize why it should be improved.

Does the process have a clearly defined starting and ending point, and is it relatively simple? One of the challenges in process management is the ability to take the complexity of our work and break it down into specific processes. If you cannot answer this question, you may not be able to answer the next question.

Is the process within your control? In other words, can you make the decisions and monitor the changes needed for improvement?

When the team ignores the previous considerations, several common errors occur. You or the team selected a process in which no one is really interested; a desired solution instead of a process; a process in transition or a process that is unstable for some reason, such as new personnel or a change in leadership; or you chose a system to study, not a process.

Let's look at processes in the context of a system. Every organization contains systems. The design and management of systems is generally strategic in nature. Systems are made up of many key processes. Processes occur at the department or function level and are often cross-functional and tactical. Many processes begin with the output of another process, and your process often feeds into the process of another department or function. Every process consists of delineated tasks or projects within the process. These operational tasks or steps form the daily operations of our departments or functions.

Understanding that processes are largely cross-functional and are defined by the system also explains why choosing the membership of a process improvement team is critical to the success and outcome of the team. So, who should be on your process improvement team? Answering each of the following questions will provide a guide for determining the membership of the process improvement team.

The first question is most important. Who owns the process? The process owner is responsible and accountable for the process and has the ability or authority to make changes in the process. Who does the work of the process? W. Edwards Deming contended in his "Fourteen Points" that those closest to the work understood best what was wrong and how to improve the work. These individuals may only have responsibility for one step of the process, but they know that step and what makes it work and what impedes the work.

Who provides input to the process? As mentioned earlier, most processes require input from other processes in the system. If the inputs of the process are faulty no amount of tinkering will improve it. You must clearly understand what is driving your process and what is needed for quality. Likewise, those who give input must know your needs and requirements for the process.

Who is the customer of the process? It is all about providing the customer of your process a quality output. Do you really know the requirements and expectations of your customer, internal or external? Who else does this process affect? Are there other stakeholders who have a direct or indirect interest in your process? While they may not be your primary customer, you should at least consider the importance of addressing those needs or requirements.

There is still more to process improvement and process management, but the questions outlined provide a starting point for any organization. We can review the overall concepts of process improvement with the analogy of learning and succeeding in tennis.

How do you do something better? Stop for a moment and consider the last time you wanted to do something better than you had before. What did you do? If you play tennis, you might have taken lessons or practiced volleying against a backboard. Both of these activities might yield some improvement in your game, but serious tennis players go one step further. To improve your game, you must know what goes into each move you make, practice doing it, and then apply it to get to the ultimate goal—winning the game.

Whether it is tennis, cooking, paying the bills, hiring employees, cleaning the schools,, or planning a lesson, improving performance requires identifying and understanding the process of how the work is accomplished. A process is a planned and repetitive sequence of steps and activities for the delivery of a service or product. Every process has inputs, something or someone supplies the process, and outputs, something or someone receives or benefits from the process. Processes can be simple or exceedingly complex, and some are critical processes or functions that make up essential activities required to achieve our mission or goals.

W. Edwards Deming, who identified key principles for quality management and improvement, noted that over 95% of work problems are not a function of individual people but the processes in place. According to Dr. Deming, if you see a problem or inefficient result, look first at the processes in place. School systems are dynamic and complex systems and contain a myriad of processes. Since processes involve suppliers and customers of the process, continuous process improvement must involve all levels and functions of the organization. No process ever sits in isolation.

High levels of performance in tennis will not be reached by only hitting the ball against a backboard. Although a tennis player may play the game as an individual, each player has a team that may include a coach, other players, and supporters who collaborate with the player to prepare for outstanding performance. Likewise, process improvement takes a team. This brief overview provides a starting point for your next or first process improvement team.

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