

Beyond Process Maturity to Process Competence

Andrew Spanyi

If you've attended any recent Business Process Management conferences, you've probably noted an increasing interest in so called 'Process Maturity' models. There's no shortage of such models. In fact, Brett Champlin, the President of the Association of Business Process Management Professionals [ABPMP] has gathered over 150 of them.

But there's a problem. While well intentioned, many of these models are mechanistic and are not likely to capture the attention of senior leaders. What's more, they invariably fail to recognize that the sole compelling reason for a firm to develop business process management practices at the enterprise level is to improve the performance of the organization in delivering value to customers and shareholders. Accordingly, many of these 'Process Maturity' models do not explicitly take into account the following two fundamental realities:

- Organizations are both complex business and complex social systems
- Exemplary business process management performance demands that leaders work collaboratively and cross-functionally

If one accepts that enterprise business process management [EBPM] is essentially about improving performance, it may even be a misnomer to talk about 'Process Maturity.' After all, neither wisdom nor skill necessarily accompanies maturity. If it is performance that really counts, then we need to go beyond maturity to look at how an organization develops **business process competence**.

Results are what really matter in business, as in sports. An individual, a team, or an organization delivers results based on a combination of aptitude and attitude. Consider that in sports, the higher the level of competition and professionalism, the more important a role is taken on by the players' attitudes. Just recall the conflict between Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant of the L.A. Lakers early in the 2003/2004 season and the impact it had on the team's performance until it was resolved.

It's the same in business. The higher the level of competition, the more important a role the attitude of the leadership team and the culture of the organization assumes.

Indeed, evidence is mounting to support the contention that the single greatest obstacle to creating an adaptive, winning organization is the traditional functional mindset of senior executives. Davenport and Beck pointed out a few years ago that many organizations suffer from an acute case of attention disorder deficit.¹ They cited that most executives receive over 100 voice mails and emails per day. That was four years ago, and since then, the volume and complexity of information flow has likely increased. It is little wonder then that many organizations have dozens and sometimes hundreds of unconnected, non-integrated improvement initiatives.

The ability of a firm's leaders to focus on what creates value for customers and shareholders is an essential ingredient in achieving sustainable competence with respect to business process management. And that requires a different mindset than that which has traditionally been the norm in many organizations.

In the traditional paradigm, executives perceive the organization as a set of boxes on the organization chart. There is little appreciation or understanding of the definition or the level of performance of the enterprise level cross-functional business processes. In the world of professional sports, that would be the equivalent of believing that a world championship can be won by simply managing the team based on the team roster alone – no playbook, no practice.

Accordingly, any business process competence model worth its salt has to consider the organization's process management performance on at least two dimensions. In addition to assessing the experience/ability or 'aptitude' of the firm to improve and manage enterprise level processes, it is equally important to assess the set of mental models and behaviors, or the 'attitude,' of the firm's leadership.

Arguably, the dimension of 'aptitude' is the easier one to assess. One simply has to take a look at the track record of the firm and decide where it fits on the scale of evolution. The ranking in Table A below, adapted from the work of Dr. Geary Rummler and Alan Brache in the 1990's, provides one method of assessing an organization's progress toward excelling at business process management.

5	The entire set of enterprise business processes are being managed for improved performance.
4	The full set of customer-touching processes is being managed for continuous improvement.
3	Significant success with process redesign projects realized, and a few key end -to-end business processes managed for continuous improvement.
2	Some prior success with process redesign projects, but not much sustainable process management.
1	Broad awareness of the need to improve and manage business processes exists, but little action so far.
0	Not much awareness of the need to improve and manage business processes exists.

Table A

It is important to note that the above ranking of a firm's experience with business process management encompasses both process improvement and process management. It also has built-in bias. The first bias built in is that success at process improvement precedes success at business process management. The second is that success in the management of customer touching or 'core' processes precedes success in managing the entire set of enterprise level processes. These biases are supported by actual observations in the field. A further essential feature of this rank order is that it places the focus more on performance than on the definition of a firm's business processes, or the use of a set of tools, or the use of a specific methodology. This is in stark contrast to some of the purely technically driven business maturity models.

The second dimension of this business process competence model is an assessment of the leadership team 'attitude.' Here, the intent is to identify the extent to which the leadership's mental models and behaviors have evolved from a traditional paradigm to one which is more contemporary and adaptive.

While some of the existing business process maturity models implicitly recognize the value of assessing leadership attitude via the currently practiced set of beliefs and behaviors, there is value

in doing so explicitly. In the absence of progress on this dimension, any gains on the experiential side will be difficult to sustain.

As opposed to a scale or a rank order, the assessment of the leadership team's set of values, beliefs, and behaviors is more qualitative.

To fully appreciate the importance of having the right attitude to enable business process performance, it is important first to understand the drawbacks of the traditional mental model.

Traditional thinking promotes silo behavior and turf protection. It stands in the way of executives understanding and improving the flow of cross-functional activities that truly create value for customers and shareholders. It represents a big obstacle to the effective deployment of enabling information technology. One could argue that it is the functional mindset that has been at the core of many horror stories and appalling business decisions in terms of deploying information technologies such as CRM and ERP systems.

Further, it promotes **an undue pre-occupation with organization structure.** This mindset contributes to the mistaken belief that if it was somehow possible to properly define the boxes on the organization chart and fill in the names of the "right" people in the key boxes, then the organization's performance would automatically improve. Yet, as we know, this is far from the truth.

Finally, it is a mindset that **reinforces a task focus, traditional command, and control behavior**, and has also led to outdated management practices in the areas of goal setting and problem solving, and it stifles innovation

In contrast to traditional thinking, Table B, below, represents some of the major factors to consider in arriving at assessment of the leadership team's 'attitude' with respect to a more adaptive business process thinking paradigm.

Leaders believe that:

- Strategy begins with the customer.
- Organizations must be designed, led, and managed in a way that makes it easy for the customer to do business with the company.
- Customer value is created through a company's enterprise-wide business processes.
- Significant improvement is achieved more through the exercise of influence than control.
- It is important to understand and manage business processes at three levels.
- Organizations are complex business and social *systems*.

Leaders are actively engaged in:

- Monitoring the firm's performance in providing products/services to customers, from a customer's point of view
- Discussing the performance of the firm's enterprise business processes
- Managing the flow of cross-functional activity in the enterprise business processes for continuous improvement

Table B.

The assessment of a firm's level of business process competence on these two dimensions permits mapping the firm's experience or aptitude against the leadership team's attitude, as displayed in Figure 1 below.

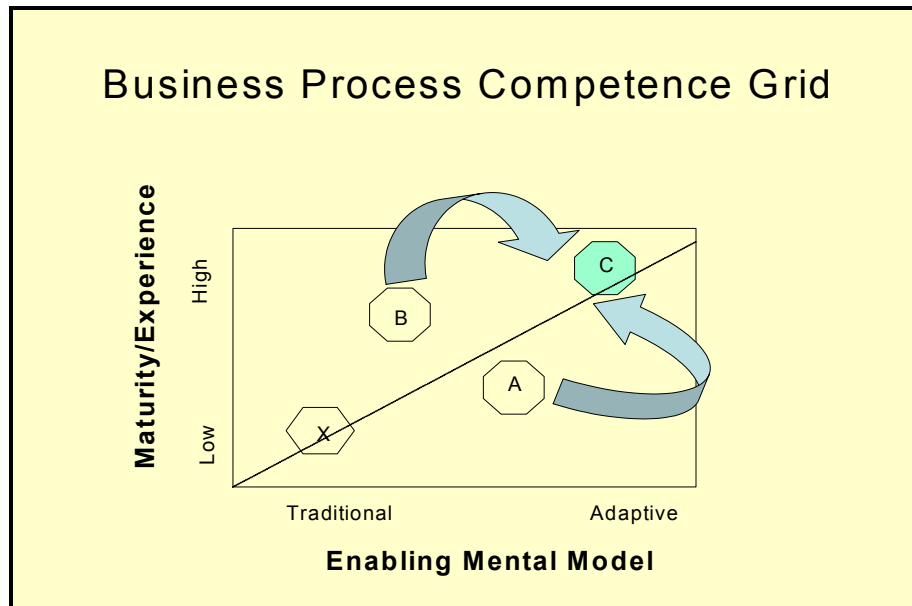


Figure 1

Assuming that the firm in question is dedicated to improving its level of business process competence, this simple two-dimensional map offers guidance on the type of action required to make progress. If the firm is currently at position 'A,' where it is a bit short on actual experience and long on the right attitude, there needs to be more focus on rapidly moving up the experience ladder though additional process improvement projects. Here, the firm's focus will be to develop consistently repeatable skill in achieving quantifiable performance improvements through business process redesign projects and making progress on the road to managing those large processes for continuous improvement.

Conversely, if the firm is currently positioned at position 'B,' where it is a bit short on the right set of leadership mental models and behaviors, there needs to be greater focus on developing an enabling leadership team attitude. This will likely involve education and senior leadership sessions on creating a shared understanding of business process management fundamentals and installing the infrastructure for EBPM.

To achieve sustainable competence in business process management, it is important to achieve progress on both dimensions. Firms currently at position 'X' will find it challenging indeed to move up the business process management continuum. That is largely because a certain threshold level of the right leadership attitude is needed to move up the scale from traditional to adaptive.

As Goleman points out in *Primal Leadership*, "No matter what leaders set out to do—whether it's creating strategy or mobilizing teams to action—their success depends on how they do it. Even if they get everything else just right, if leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should." Further, the authors argue that the metamorphosis of an individual from a command and control paradigm to one where

emotional intelligence is exercised requires conscious effort and significant force of will.ⁱⁱ This is equally true for leadership teams who aspire to develop the right attitude for improving performance through business process management.

This is the third opportunity for us to get business process thinking right. Deming and Juran led the way in the Eighties. Some progress was made, but the traditional mindset was far too entrenched for true sustainability. Davenport, Hammer, and Rummler were some of the thought leaders in the Nineties. But the outsized promises of reengineering combined with the quest for the ‘silver bullet’ sub-optimized results.

Some of the logic stuck, but, due to executive attention deficit disorder and possibly a case of corporate Alzheimer’s, much of it didn’t. **What is different this time is rapidly evolving BPM technology.** But the best technology in the world will not lead to sustainable business process competence in the absence of the right mix of aptitude and attitude. **Let’s not forget that in business, as in baseball, three strikes and you’re out.**

So let us focus on competence and not on maturity. Competence drives results through the right mix of aptitude and attitude – and that’s what business process management is all about.

ⁱ Davenport, Thomas H., and John C. Beck, ‘Getting the Attention You Deserve,’ HBR September-October 2000

ⁱⁱ Goleman, Daniel, and Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, ‘Primal Leadership,’ HBS Press, 2002

Andrew Spanyi is the author of *Business Process Management is a Team Sport, Play It to Win!* Visit the book’s Web site at <http://www.anclote.com/spanyi.html>.

He has worked with executive teams at global organizations for nearly two decades, assisting them in transforming the way they tend to think about their business. You can reach Andrew at andrew@spanyi.com or (905) 302-4061.