

## 7 Deadly SINS of Unsuccessful Process Improvement

In the past 5 years, companies of all sizes and industries have become aware that they need to improve business processes such as product development, order fulfillment, planning, distribution, billing, hiring, and customer service. Everybody is doing - or at least talking about doing - “process improvement,” “process redesign,” or “process reengineering.”

In our experience, most failures to realize the potential return on process improvement investment arise from committing one or more of what we call the *seven deadly sins*.

- Improvement Not Tied To Strategy
- Right People Not Involved In The Right Way
- Charters Not Clear/Appropriate
- Assuming That Significant Improvement Requires Blowing Up The Place
- Insufficient Attention to Human Factors
- Insufficient Attention to Implementation
- No Infrastructure for Continuous Improvement

### **SIN 1: Process Improvement is not tied to the strategic issues the business faces.**

Process Improvement Projects should be driven by an issue critical to the organization, such as profitability, market share, regulatory compliance, safety, or customer satisfaction. They also should be tied to measurable goals.

Your greatest return on investments in Process Improvement comes from its use as a tool for implementing strategy. The CEO must ensure that there's a focused, intelligent strategy to be implemented. Likewise, he or she must ensure that the Process Improvement plan matches the core processes to the Critical Success Factors and to the issues standing between the organization and achievement of its strategy vision.

### **SIN 2: The Process Improvement effort does not involve the right people, especially top management, in the right way.**

Organizations are frequently tempted to hire experts to “do it for us.” However, when the changes come from the outside, they do not garner sufficient commitment from those who have to implement them.

Process Improvement should be done by the people involved in the process, including customers and suppliers. A value-add role can be played by external or internal consultants, but that role does not entail doing the analysis and redesign for the people who work in the process and who will have to live with the changes.

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### **SIN 3: Process Improvement Teams are not given a clear, appropriate charter and are not held accountable for fulfilling that charter.**

Let's say you have a good Process Improvement Team staffed with highly motivated people at the right levels from the right departments and geographical areas. That's a good start. However, if they do not have a clear sense of their assignment's direction and boundaries, they will flounder, lose their energy, and fail to meet expectations.

Having established the charter, top management must maintain the pressure for results. Excessive analysis can paralyze a Process Improvement effort, because there's always an additional piece of information that can be gathered or an additional level of root cause that can be unearthed. At some point, the sponsors of an improvement effort have to revert back to the charter and make it clear that it's time to move on.

### **SIN 4: The top management team thinks that if it's not "nuking" the existing organization, it's not making significant improvements.**

Don't measure the success of Process Improvement efforts in terms of how many boxes were changed on the organization chart, how many heads were cut, how much was spent on automation, or how different things are.

Instead, measure success in terms of the degree to which you use Process Improvement as a tool to resolve issues and achieve strategy. Be prepared for some in-the-trenches changes, as well as for the breakthroughs that hit the newspapers. Don't be discouraged with the small number of "wins" and the time between them.

### **SIN 5: Process designers don't sufficiently consider how the changes will affect the people who have to work in the new process.**

Too often, process re-designers follow the "field of dreams" approach – "build an intelligent process. . . and they will come." Our experience indicates that this approach rarely succeeds. People don't automatically fall in line with even a brilliantly designed process.

A new process needs to be "sanity-checked" against the abilities of the people who will be affected; the company had to adjust its process to accommodate the real world of human capabilities.

### **SIN 6: The organization focuses more on redesign than on implementation.**

Process redesign is all academic until implementation. The investment in creating the changes pales in comparison with the calendar time, the management time, and the resources required for successful implementation of those changes.

Top management has been defined as group of people who suffer from attention span deficit disorder (ASD Disorder). You and the other members of your top management team must remain focused during the time it takes to install the redesign. Process Improvement implementation usually includes changes to policies, forms, computer systems, job descriptions, and rewards.

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### **SIN 7: Teams fail to leave behind a measurement system and other parts of the infrastructure necessary for continuous Process Improvement.**

If an organization doesn't move from Process Improvement (projects) to Process Management (continuous improvement), it has engaged in some needed problem solving but has not realized the potential return on its investment.

Process Management must rest on a foundation of measures. Once measures have been established, management must monitor performance against them and use this information as the basis for decision-making, problem identification, feedback, and rewards.

In addition to measures, Process Management usually requires each key process to have a senior-level "owner." These executives are expected to monitor, report on, and troubleshoot process performance; to coordinate Process Improvement efforts; and to share "best practices" across product lines and geographic areas.

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**In most companies, the chief executive no longer asks, "What is Process Improvement?" or "Why should I improve my processes?"  
Today, he or she asks, "How can I increase the return on my Process Improvement investment?"  
We believe a large part of the answer is, "By avoiding these deadly sins."**

- Alan P. Brache

