

Looking at Work Horizontally

by Kathleen Hurson, Jan Latham, and Linda Moran

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LOOKING AT WORK HORIZONTALLY

The Challenge

In recent years virtually every size of organization in North America has undertaken some kind of formal improvement activity: quality improvement, TQM, quality circles, employee empowerment, work teams, kaizen, statistical process control, reengineering, focus on the customer, and work redesign, to name just a few.

The Results

In many cases, real improvements have been made. In other cases, however, the results have not been as substantial as hoped. After an initial burst of enthusiasm, commitment has often faded. Improvements, even though substantial, may have had little impact on the organization's strategic goals.

Even when the changes did have an impact, results were often short-lived. Too often things ultimately slipped back to where they had been before.

The Need

What's needed is a comprehensive approach to all these improvement efforts—one that will do the following:

- Produce results—greater profitability, more satisfied customers, increased market share, and a reduction in operating costs.

- Engage everyone's best efforts.
- Focus everyone on issues of strategic importance to the organization.
- Sustain improvements.
- Facilitate further change as it becomes necessary.

The Starting Point

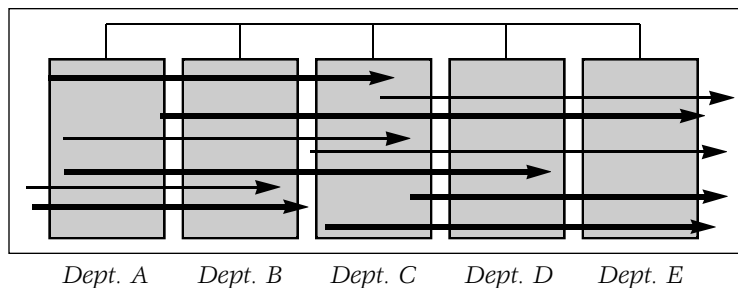
Look at work horizontally.

THE BIG PICTURE: STARTING AT THE TOP

Looking at work horizontally can produce major, organization-wide payoffs. But the process must start at the top, with the people who have the greatest responsibility for the present and future well-being of the organization.

Why do we need to look at work horizontally?

Because that's how work takes place. Even though most organizations are organized vertically by departments, work actually flows through an organization horizontally, across departments, as in the diagram below.



In any organization there are hundreds, if not thousands, of processes, both large and small, that fit inside or connect with other processes. There are processes for reserving a meeting room, for handling customer calls, and for designing new products.

Many people think of work processes only in connection with manufacturing. They seldom think of all the work processes that exist within administrative, white-collar, or professional work.

How does all this connect to the problems we've got around here, such as high operating costs, declining market share, and unsatisfied customers?

One big connection is the cost of poor quality. Studies by the American Society for Quality Control indicate that poor quality can cost a company up to 10 percent of gross sales each year.¹ When you consider that industrial manufacturing alone netted in excess of six trillion dollars in revenue in 1992, the impact of the cost of poor quality on the North American competitive position is staggering.² A frequent cause: Top management makes decisions in the vacuum of vertically managed departmental silos without any direct involvement either from customers or those front-line employees who are in touch with customers. Therefore, management has little idea how these decisions will affect other departments within the organization or how they will be viewed by the external customer.

How does looking at work horizontally address the cost of poor quality and other problems?

When you look at work horizontally, many improvement fundamentals fall into place more or less automatically. For one thing, you're forced to think in terms of outputs, the end result of all the work you do, instead of focusing only on isolated pieces along the way. This view in turn helps you see how these isolated pieces are linked.

Focusing on outputs helps you focus on your customers. Are the outputs giving them what they want? Do you know what they want? Do you know what they need? With the vertical approach, there's no room for the customer.

You can also better manage the “white spaces”—those hand-off points between departments where no one is responsible and things can go so wrong.

That's where your improvement efforts can really pay off—in reduced costs and shorter cycle times.

Which processes should we concentrate on to get the biggest payoff?

Select processes that are both strategically important to your organization and that need improvement. Use data to guide your choice of where to focus your attention. Choose processes that perform poorly, exert a big impact on customer satisfaction, and/or hold the potential to catapult you ahead of your competition.

Deciding priority processes to focus on in your organization is a job for the executive team. In terms of positioning the organization to become more profitable and competitive, making this decision could be the single most important thing executive team members ever do.

Although every organization has hundreds of processes, each has only a handful of strategic processes—the large-scale, critical processes that are fundamental to the competitive stand and survival of an organization. Taken together, strategic processes define what an organization does. Here's a generic list.

- Designing and developing new products and/or services.
- Producing products.
- Generating leads and making sales.
- Receiving and fulfilling orders.
- Billing and collecting money.
- Providing service and support.

A strategic process almost always includes the work of several departments or functions and, of course, encompasses many smaller processes. Organizations often find that when they identify their strategic processes, people automatically begin thinking in the right direction—i.e., toward real improvement that makes a difference.

Why bother identifying these strategic processes?

Strategic processes are where you succeed or fail as an organization. They enable you to understand how your customers and other outsiders view your organization.

Looking at work horizontally enables you to organize not only your improvement, but also your ongoing management efforts, around these strategic processes. The intent is to improve and manage your strategic processes so that they:

- Are free of errors and unnecessary delays.
- Operate more efficiently and without needless complexity.
- Respond more readily to customers' needs.
- Make the best possible use of organizational resources.
- Help the organization compete successfully.

When you take this approach, you can look at everything that's going on in your organization and ask, among other things, "Does this support one or more of our strategic processes? If not, let's get rid of it."

What's the payoff?

The biggest payoff is becoming more competitive and profitable by:

- Reducing costs.
- Getting products to market faster so you get a jump on your competition.
- Increasing market share through better products and services.
- Building a more satisfied customer base.

Another payoff is revitalizing and refocusing existing improvement efforts so they can generate the results they were intended to produce.

Which organizations are taking this approach?

According to a *Business Week* cover story on "The Horizontal Corporation," organizations taking this approach include Chrysler Corporation, Xerox, AT&T, Eastman Chemical, DuPont, General Electric, and Motorola.³

Are there any real success stories?

Looking at work horizontally is the starting point for many improvement efforts, from incremental improvements to reengineered processes. The following examples suggest the range and magnitude of possibilities.

A mortgage bank, operating in a fast-expanding market, realized it would get more business if it could set up branch offices faster and more efficiently than its competition. Since no one had ever looked at the overall task horizontally—in a way that would incorporate leasing, office layout, furniture, telecommunications, hiring and training—the institution designed a new cross-functional process for this purpose and put it in place.

*Results: The next three branch openings cost 40 percent less than originally projected; the percentage of tasks to be completed by the opening date increased from 40 to 95 percent. Within six months, the average time to open a branch had been cut in half.*⁴

A manufacturer of automation control devices took product development out of the "engineering silo" and made it the responsibility of a horizontal, cross-functional team of people from engineering, manufacturing, marketing, sales, and finance.

Result: Six new products were brought to market in one-third the time it would normally have taken ⁵

Because of inefficient intake and evaluation procedures, a chronic care hospital was taking an average of almost 10 days to fill an empty bed—even though demand for hospitalization within the community was high. To reduce this figure, the hospital formed a cross-functional team to improve the process. On the team were people representing the community, nursing, doctors, admissions, and administration.

Results: A standardized decision tree was developed to identify key patient “descriptors” and relate them to the type of room and services required. The average length of time beds now remain empty is 6.5 days; the average savings, \$24,000 a month. ⁶

A unit of a telecommunications system took the horizontal point of view and analyzed steps in its process from initial customer contact through the collection of funds. This approach enabled the team members to identify a series of problems, among them too much rework, too many hand-offs, and too much time between sale and installation.

Results: Thanks to a major redesign, customer willingness to repurchase went up from 53 to 82 percent; adjustments dropped from four to 0.6 percent of revenues; bills paid within 30 days of installation went up from 31 to 71 percent; and 88 percent of customers now rate the project management of their system sale and installation as “excellent.” ⁷

To reduce costs and improve customer service, the health claims processing division of a large insurance company wanted to scan all incoming paper documents into its computer system so the documents would be available electronically to anyone who needed them. Before the division introduced technology, however, it took a horizontal look at the entire flow of documents and streamlined the process as much as possible.

Results: Claims approval time decreased from five to two days; duplicate and rehandled claims decreased by 15 percent; and time to answer customer questions about the status of their claims decreased from nine days to 24 hours ⁸

It took a manufacturer of metal parts for auto makers anywhere from 18 to 41 days to respond to customer requests for changes in parts. To improve this record, the company reengineered the process, taking a horizontal look across all involved functions: sales, engineering, prototyping, manufacturing, and accounting.

Results: Response time was reduced to a consistent six days; additional improvements were identified that would reduce it to four; and several cost-savings steps were identified. ⁹

REQUIRED: AN UNDERSTANDING ABOUT WORK

Improving and managing strategic processes calls for an understanding about work that is new for some people, especially those in administrative, service,

and professional occupations. This approach holds that work processes should be made up of definable, consistent, and predictable activities. The goal is to have consistent and predictable work processes that turn out uniform, predictable outputs.

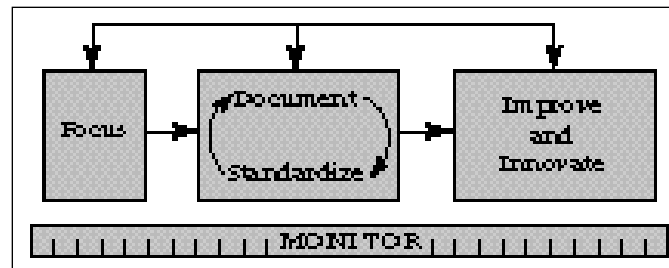
Once everyone performs work according to agreed-upon processes, they know where to look for problems: in the process itself, not in the inconsistent way it's being performed. This knowledge tells people where to focus their improvement efforts.

The only way to achieve these ideals is by knowing how to measure and document the work processes in enough detail to aid in their improvement step by step, under various circumstances, and at various times.

Is this the same as the continuous improvement process called kaizen?

This approach is similar in many ways to kaizen, and also to the P-D-C-A cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) associated with Deming's teachings.

Basically, process management is a cyclical approach to improvement as shown in the diagram below. First you focus on a critical process that is falling short of the performance objectives you have set for it. You document and standardize it, and then you make improvements and innovations. These in turn become part of the new standardized process.



Throughout these efforts, you're constantly monitoring the process and customer responses to know how the process is performing against key criteria.

Is this appropriate for white-collar and professional work?

Process management is appropriate for almost all types of work if it's done right; i.e., if the work is correctly defined to reflect all the complexity that may be appropriate. In the first place, aspects of white-collar work are as repetitive as aspects of manufacturing work. In both sectors, there is also nonrepetitive work that calls for judgment and analysis. Such work can still be described in terms of a process—although the process may be quite complex. Many of the steps and subprocesses can be defined and the results measured.

The truth is, every employee takes “input” and works to create “output” that customers or others in the organization use. Saying that these inputs and outputs should be consistent and predictable doesn't mean they have to be overly simplified or mechanistic.

This understanding of work does not devalue or eliminate the bright idea in the middle of the night, the judgment or analysis that requires years of insight and education, or emergency or non-routine work. Quite the contrary: by clarifying all work and distinguishing the routine from the non-routine, process management can free all employees to put their energies into the tasks they are uniquely equipped to perform

Won't white-collar and professional employees resist this approach?

All sorts of people may resist this approach at first. It may seem to some employees that what they do is being “reduced” to a series of predictable steps. Another common response: “We just don't work that way around here. Things are too hectic.”

Resistance diminishes, however, when people begin to understand these principles:

- There are aspects of their work that are or should be performed in a predictable way—to fit in with the efforts of others and to make sure customers always get what they want.
- By reducing variability in the inputs people receive and in the ways they perform certain parts of their work, people gain more time for the less predictable parts of their jobs.
- Consistency pays off in more predictable outputs and more satisfied customers.
- Important decisions are based on data—and no longer on best guesses or the views of whoever can argue the most persuasively.

How much time does all this measuring and documenting take?

It's fair to say that the gains realized tend to be proportional to the effort expended. It does take some extra time, especially at first, to get a handle on processes that no one may have bothered to manage before. Clearly, the less understood and documented a process is, the more time is required to get it down on paper. Gradually, however, employees develop a baseline of information and incorporate ongoing information collection into their regular work.

We already do a lot of measuring that isn't very effective. How can we improve it and adapt it to this approach?

The key to effective measurement is to make sure it relates to strategic goals. Looking at work horizontally helps you establish a focus to do the following:

- Measure and document only work that needs to be improved in order to meet a key strategic objective.
- Measure against specific performance objectives, not in a vacuum. You measure to identify where you stand currently, how much you need to improve to meet your goal, and how much progress you have made toward that goal.
- Use the data collected to make decisions. As more and more decisions are based on hard data, people begin to see the practical need for accurate, up-to-date information.

You will soon see that the simple act of measuring, documenting, and standardizing a process invariably produces improvements in it—often substantial improvements.

Why can't we just fix what obviously needs fixing? That's what we've always done.

In most markets today, costs are too high and competition too fierce for people to make improvements by the seat of their pants—even if the improvements “seem” obvious. Why? Here are some reasons:

- What you think obviously needs fixing may not be what your customers think needs to be fixed.
- Obvious fixes in one area can create problems upstream or downstream.
- The more complex an organization's problems become, the less obvious the problems or solutions are. "Obvious" fixes often perpetuate the old way of doing things. What may be needed to jump ahead of the competition is a whole new "unobvious" approach.
- People often implement a solution to test their best guess of what the problem is. If the problem goes away, they assume they've correctly analyzed the problem, but they can't really be sure. This approach may work in simple cases, but it is far too wasteful of time and resources in more complicated situations.
- As all organizations continue to improve, the improvements that make a competitive difference become smaller in scope and more finely honed. Under these circumstances it's important to know exactly which improvements will pay off in more satisfied customers and improved business.

TEAMS: POWERFUL, FLEXIBLE, AND HORIZONTAL

If organizations are structured vertically and work flows horizontally, how is it possible to take a horizontal view without completely restructuring? The answer is teams—of executives, managers, and front-line workers—groups of people organized around a specific work process or subprocess that needs improving. Most teams are cross-functional. That is, members of a team usually come from several parts of the organization; what they have in common is some involvement with one or more pieces of the process in question.

Some teams take ownership for the improvement and management of an entire strategic process or subprocess. They last as long as the process needs to be improved and managed. Other teams are responsible for a specific improvement project; when the project is completed, these teams disband.

Why teams? Why not just restructure the organization around strategic processes?

Organizations that look at work horizontally may eventually make some changes to their departmental structures. At the same time, few totally reorganize around strategic processes.

For one thing, there is usually a need to maintain some traditional structure. It's often easier and more economical to manage and support people and resources of one kind—finance, for example—if they are in one organizational entity. For another, as an organization improves and changes, the components of its strategic processes may change as well. Any permanent horizontal reorganization would become as much of a stumbling block as the traditional series of vertical silos.

By their nature, teams are flexible. They can change in composition, re-form, or go out of business altogether, depending on the need.

Is greater flexibility the only reason to use teams?

No. When you bring employees together on teams—both management and front-line teams—to improve strategic processes, people begin to see the work they do in a bigger context, especially when the teams are cross-functional. Team members start to see

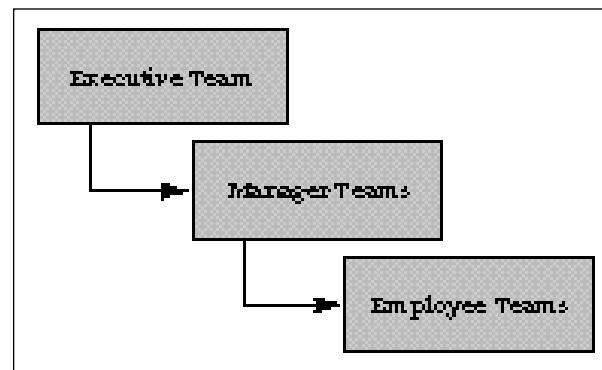
how their work relates to the rest of the organization, how it affects other people, how it affects customers, and how it contributes (or fails to contribute) to strategic goals.

Instead of just blindly “doing their job,” all employees become attuned to how they might fit in better with others they interact with in the organization. Furthermore, as they broaden their horizons and gain the proper training and support, team members become more skilled in performing a broader array of tasks.

What keeps all these teams headed in the same direction?

The fact that the teams are organized around the processes they're responsible for—and linked by levels up and down the organization—keeps them on track as shown in the following diagram.

- Typically, an executive team identifies an organization's strategic processes and oversees the overall improvement effort.
- Teams of managers are formed, one for each strategic process under improvement. They establish objectives for overall process performance and oversee all improvement efforts for their strategic process.
- Teams of managers also assign teams of front-line employees to work on smaller portions of the strategic process. Typically, a member of the manager (or strategic) team will serve as the leader of the frontline employee (or spin-off) team. Spin-off teams take responsibility for subprocess improvement projects that in turn support the improvement goals of the manager's strategic team.



Interlinked Team Structure

In this way, the strategic focus established by the executive team is cascaded down through the team structure, guaranteeing that all improvement efforts support an improvement objective the organization has decided is critically important.

Who manages these teams?

Most teams will have a leader— someone responsible for the overall process and its results. Typically, this is the person whose job gives him or her the greatest stake in the process.

To be most effective, teams should encourage maximum participation and empowerment of the members. This can be accomplished by providing sufficient training and guidance and then giving teams as much leeway as possible to determine how they will reach the required improvement goals. This approach supports the belief that, once

they understand the type and degree of improvement the organization requires, those closest to the work know best how to improve it.

How are these teams different from quality circles and other improvement teams?

Strategic process teams differ primarily in their interconnectedness to one another through the strategic processes across the organization, their responsibility for achieving specific objectives that are related to overall organizational strategic needs, and their authority not only to analyze, but to take action.

What is the relationship between teams and existing departments?

This relationship varies among organizations. Typically, departments dominate organizationally at first. As teams get more experience and some successes under their belts, they can ultimately become more influential. For example, where once an employee would have gone to a department manager for approval of a proposal, he/she may now take the idea to a team for its reaction.

On the other hand, even if teams are successful, departments may not go away, especially as long as budgets and performance evaluations are department-based. If and when the department orientation for these matters changes, the position of departments will probably change as well.

Aren't teams an inefficient way to manage, compared to the traditional chain of command?

Management of cross-functional processes through the traditional chain of command has not been inefficient; it's been nearly nonexistent.

It's true that participatory management can take longer and seem messier than top-down management, especially in the early stages of making a decision or setting a new direction. All members want their say, lines of authority are unclear or nonexistent, and people aren't sure where they fit in.

Once team members feel clearly aligned around their task, however, the team approach results in more ownership of a given plan or action, elicits better efforts from employees, and requires less supervision and control. The only people who laugh at the phrase "employee involvement" are those who've never witnessed the power and creativity it can unleash. By setting up a fully empowered, team-based enterprise ("Team Zebra"), Kodak completely turned around its failing black and white film-making flow division.¹⁰

Fully empowered team members do something because they think it's right, not because they've been told to do it—and that makes a tremendous difference.

Don't these teams represent still another layer?

It can certainly feel that way, especially in the beginning. Yet, for the most part, teams use the existing layers more effectively. The existing executive group can define the strategic processes and oversee the overall improvement effort. Existing departmental groups are often appropriate for handling specific improvement projects once they have been identified by cross-functional teams.

While it's true that cross-functional teams of mid-managers may represent a new layer, most people believe that the payoffs—(1) improved process performance and (2) a cadre of managers knowledgeable about strategic organizationwide issues—are more

WHERE DOES REENGINEERING FIT IN?

Incremental improvement starts with the existing process and makes improvements in it. Reengineering starts from a clean slate and designs a process from scratch to fit the needs of the present and the future. Looking at work horizontally paves the way for either approach.

What's the big appeal of reengineering?

The appeal is the potential it holds for major one-time gains versus the smaller and slower gains associated with incremental improvement. Beleaguered organizations may be in such bad shape—or their competition so overwhelming—that they need to make big gains as quickly as possible and thus have no choice but to reengineer.

Reengineering is closely associated with information technology and the benefits that its recent advances make possible. Such technology can make work more efficient, increase customer satisfaction, and reduce costs. Also, in the minds of many people, reengineering is virtually synonymous with downsizing and the opportunity to reduce costs.

What are the dangers?

As more and more organizations reengineer, it's clear that reengineering can fail to deliver on its promises just as an incremental improvement initiative can. Although the gains of reengineering may be greater than those of incremental improvement, so usually are the costs and the risks.

Perhaps the biggest danger is maintaining a blind faith that reengineering and technology are always good things. The truth is, they may not be the solutions to every problem. Jumping blindly into reengineering without a great deal of prior analysis is a real danger.

Another danger is to reengineer without giving sufficient thought to the “human element”—the men and women whose jobs will need to be reconfigured (or eliminated) to accommodate the new design. This “slash and burn” approach is not as clean and simple as it looks on paper. It can leave behind a legacy of fear, low morale, and poor performance.

So how do you know which to start with—reengineering or incremental improvement?

As a general rule, start with incremental improvement, unless you have a compelling reason to reengineer. “Compelling” in this case means that one or more of the following is true:

- Competitive pressures will definitely put you out of business before incremental improvements will produce a significant impact.
- A drastic budget reduction or drop in revenue threatens long-term survival.
- Your competitors are adopting a new technology that substantially alters one or more work processes.
- People perform the process so differently that one clear process cannot be identified and defined.

In all other cases, start with incremental improvement. The biggest reason to do so is that, done correctly, reengineering requires all of the initial analysis and documentation incremental improvement achieves.

Reengineering stands the greatest chance of delivering on its promise if you can first squeeze every drop of improvement out of the existing process. Then, if it's still not producing up to your requirements, you can reengineer. By this point, however, your improvement efforts will have given you a thorough understanding of the process and the various needs it must fulfill. This understanding will help you make the most of your reengineering effort. Also, by first improving the process, the employees whose jobs are involved will understand how improvement works and will presumably support the effort.

GETTING STARTED

Looking at work horizontally requires employees with certain skills. Getting started can often be made easier with some outside help.

What work competencies do people need to take this approach? The employee skills required are common to most of today's improvement efforts. They include the ability to:

- Lead and participate in meetings.
- Apply a standard problem-solving process.
- Collect and analyze data.
- Work effectively with others. (give and receive feedback, etc.)
- Reach decisions by consensus.

You also need people with special skills to help teams work effectively, to coordinate improvement efforts across the organization, and in the case of reengineering, to advise on issues of work redesign and information technology.

How dependent will this approach make us on outside consulting help?

That depends. Some organizations rely heavily on outside consultants throughout the process. Others start with outside help and quickly take over themselves. Still others prefer to do everything internally from the beginning.

Consider these factors when deciding how much outside help you need:

- Existing skills and expertise within your organization.
- Complexity of your strategic process.
- Urgency of your need to change.
- Size and geographic dispersion of those elements of your organization that need to be involved.

What threats does taking this approach pose for employees and how should we deal with them?

- The simple fact of change threatens most people. That's why it's important for all employees to understand why the change is being made and how it will affect them.
- People may fear layoffs. This very real fear should be confronted head-on and as truthfully as possible.
- Because issues will be handled cross-functionally, employees may resist what they see as encroachment from other departments on what was once their turf. Turf issues can often be defused by refocusing employees away from departmental concerns and toward customer expectations. Customers don't care who does what, so long as their needs are satisfied.
- Traditionally, mid-managers have been the most threatened by organizational improvements; for many, it's their world that changes most. Involving them on cross-functional management teams that link the executive team with the front-line teams gives them a critically important role to play.

What are the pitfalls we should avoid?

Potential problems need to be anticipated and addressed early on. They can arise from a number of situations:

- Failing to maintain a strong, consistent focus on the priority issues.
- Defining strategic processes too narrowly to produce results—or too broadly to manage them effectively.
- Failing to give team members enough authority, responsibility, and training to take charge of their own strategic process or subprocess (within the framework of the overall improvement).
- Continuing to base decisions on opinions and best guesses, rather than hard data.
- Failing to fully endorse and support process monitoring.
- Deciding to take on too much.
- Failing to communicate adequately at all levels concerning the reasons change is necessary, the results being achieved, the problems cropping up (and their solutions), and the mid- and long-term goals being achieved.

What are the ingredients for success?

- *Executive commitment and active involvement.* Experience shows that no ingredient is more crucial. In successful change efforts, some executives may spend close to half their time on related activities.
- *Sufficient resources.* Having the right resources and other support to help the organization succeed when times get tough, as they always do during any major change, is imperative.
- *Awareness of how organizational change works.* This helps people deal with the normal ups and downs of change.
- *A willingness to take the long-term view.* Direct or indirect pressures for instant results and quick fixes will sabotage success.
- *A consistent demand for decisions based on hard data.* Everyone needs to value the need for data and to know how to collect it, analyze it, and use it to support a position.
- *Fully participating employees.* Virtually every facet of the organization needs to be involved in the effort

IN SUMMARY

Everyone must realize that looking at work horizontally, as well as everything that follows from that approach, is not a “program” or some other externally imposed temporary measure. Rather, process management is a permanent shift in how all the people in the organization think about their work.

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