



The dangers of good process

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We ITIL practitioners know a 'good' process when we see one; a good process is simple, intuitive and creates predictable outcomes, it is measurable, owned, reviewed and improved. In CMMi we talk about a mature process as being documented, controlled, linked to strategic processes, business aligned and proactively and continuously improved with the nirvana being an optimized process.

Processes are a part of working in business and technology, processes are good things, but two recent events have made me realise that processes have a dark side; processes can be a dangerous thing.

The first story was told to me by a colleague and I was so fascinated I followed up via the internet and found it to be a well documented story. The story goes like this: A father takes his 11 year old son to a ball game in the US, the boy is thirsty so father goes to buy some drinks, all that is available is lemonade, in fact a product called 'Hard Lemonade'. The father returns to his seat and the father and the son enjoy their refreshments. A Security guard sees boy drinking alcohol, provided by father and calls an ambulance. Hard Lemonade is 5% alcohol! The ambulance arrives and takes the son to hospital. The Child Protection Agency is called to the hospital and the son is released to foster care for 3 days. The case ends up in court and the judge rules that son can go back to the family home, however father must check into a hotel. After two weeks the situation was resolved and the family was reunited. At each stage in this sequence of events the people involved said 'I'm sorry to do this but we must follow procedures'.

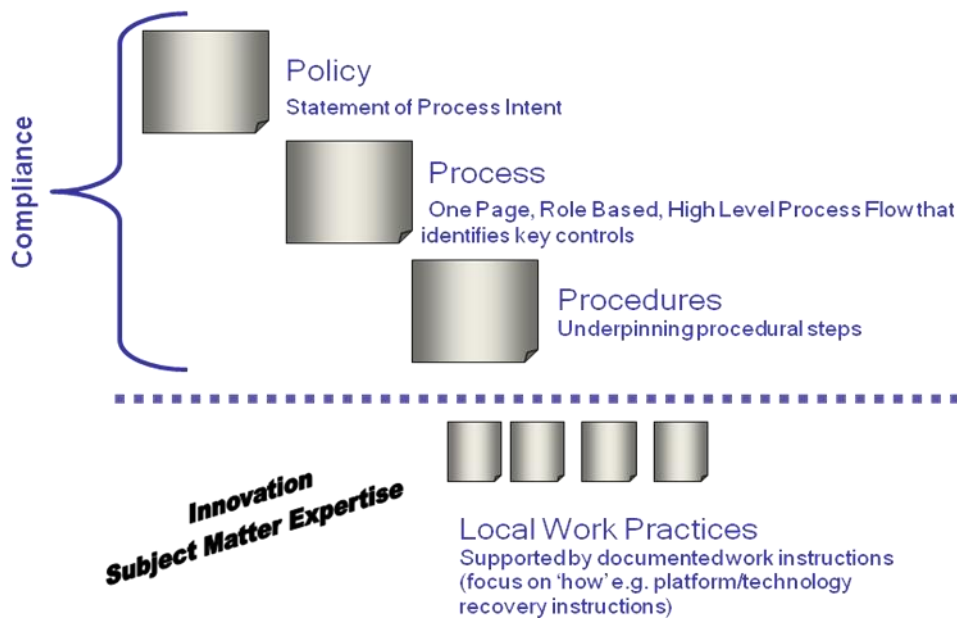
The second process story is a little closer to home but the consequences were more significant for a 17 year old school boy who died of dehydration after being lost in Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. The coronial inquest identified a systemic failure within the NSW ambulance service as the operators who received his calls would not dispatch a unit until a street address was provided. This was part of the documented process and the operator was following procedure.

The fundamental issues with both of these situations are that people followed process, in spite of what their instincts told them – this is the danger of process. Barry Schwartz, psychologist, (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bschwar1/>) talks about Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom and that rules and processes are eroding humanity's ability to practice virtue and the moral will to do the right thing. Practical wisdom is the combination of moral will and moral skill and it is a valuable asset; a wise person will know when to follow process and when to improvise, how to deal with ambiguity, how to apply context to a decision.

So back in technology and working with ITIL what does all this mean to us? I remember walking into a change management process design workshop a couple of years ago. They had asked me to come in to review the work that they had done on designing a change management process, they had a hit a brick wall and needed some guidance. The process at this stage was 11 pages long and as I struggled to comprehend the process I realized the issue. The process attempted to deal with every possible exception that could occur. For example what happens when I raise my change and the CI is in the CMDB, what if it is not, what if a duplicate CI is discovered, what happens if the Change is incorrectly categorised, what happens if the Change Manager is absent, what happens if I don't feel like raising a change today because I am tired (OK. I exaggerate). These exceptions are all possible, but do we really need to prescribe the way we deal with all of these? What was more concerning is that the team could not state the overall intent of the process, why they needed Change Management and what strategic objectives of IT and the business it supported. This information is typically captured in a policy document and it provides the 'Why'. For many people if we get this step right, if we can clearly state the intent of the process, then most people have the moral will and skill to work towards the outcome. Life would be great if it was as simple as this, however typically organizations need evidence that the outcomes has been achieved, therefore we need to be able to measure, in some cases prove the outcome and ensure that the intent or objectives of the process are being achieved. So the policy document not only states the intent, but defines the measures of success that will enable us to confirm that objectives have been met.



Can we leave it at that and let the organization work out the 'how' given these clear objectives and measures? Well, not really because there are often real benefits of people operating in a similar way to achieve an outcome; easier to measure, easier to automate, consistent data for reporting and in some cases there are key controls that must be met for compliance reasons. e.g. Sarbanes-Oxley. As an aside it is interesting that standards like Sarbanes-Oxley have come about because people did not have the moral will to do the right thing and therefore they provide a legacy of more rules, more process and more controls. So following on from a clear intent it is also useful to have high level, role based process flow. As we are designing our process it is important to look at what are the minimum controls we need to have in place and build our process to meet these. It is also important to note that these controls will vary depending on your organisation, typically a bank will require a greater level of controls and compliance around financial reporting than for example, a University.



To make the job of process design simpler and ultimately more successful in operation the diagram above; process design architecture, may be useful. This will provide a top down approach, ensuring alignment of the process with the organisations strategic objectives, will minimize the complexity of the process, but will still rely on individuals moral will and skill to do the right thing. This approach will ensure you do not pour 'wet cement' over your organization, bogging down in over engineered processes, disabling innovation and preventing individuals thinking and making decisions. This approach calls out the 'above the line' controls where compliance is mandatory, but leaves many of the work practices 'below the line' to the teams and individuals to drive innovation and improvisation so they can learn practical wisdom via experience.

In summary organizations do need policies, processes and procedures. The policy should simply outline the intent and measures. The process should be simple, transparent, complete and on one page. It will also provide the context; hand offs and input from other processes. Procedures are important in the design stage, however if you get the Policy and Process right people will rarely refer to the detailed procedures. The work practices are not the domain of the process governor; it is the responsibility of the support team to understand the key controls and make sure they comply, but also to support innovation and improvisation. As long as they are meeting the key controls of the process – do we care how they achieve the outcome?

Of course getting the process design right is important but the most important factor which will determine the outcome of a process is the culture of the organization. If we have a rigid culture where we rely on stringent rules and processes we are likely to see more outcomes such as those outlined in the introduction, where moral will, the drive to do the right thing, is eroded by too many rules and procedures. We need to find a balance in our process designs but we also need to provide the right supporting organizational culture, we need to provide a safe environment to improvise, the ability to learn from our mistakes, provide mentoring and coaching to our staff.



Gaining wisdom depends on experience if we have too many processes and rules, we reduce the opportunity to experience then we don't trust our judgment and we therefore implement more rules and processes, again compounding the problem

So whilst no process is 'bad' in its intent, the evidence suggests that in some extreme situations the outcome can be very bad if we blindly follow process at the expense of human beings innate desire to do the right thing – moral will combined with moral skill. I urge all of us to think about how we can achieve this balance when implementing processes.

About Lucid IT

Lucid IT is the most experienced Australian IT Service Management provider in the fields of professional management, consulting and education services. We have a practical, holistic approach towards process implementation and improvement services, with a strong focus on the delivery of results, using best practices such as ITIL, COBIT and PRINCE2.