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# The concept of process management

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## Keywords

Organizational learning, Learning organizations, Process management, Action research, Action learning, Experiential learning

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## Abstract

Presents a conceptual framework for process management of groups involved in action learning and action research. Discusses propositional, practical and experiential learning; and the concept of meta-learning (learning to learn) in relation to the "learning organisation". Presents a model of process management that concerns people and process, with implications for research in industry, government and higher education.

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## Introduction

A new management style is beginning to pervade businesses and higher education institutions in many parts of the world. From an obsession with products and commodities, many have at last come to recognise that a principal issue is the process that delivers an outcome. Traditional management was product-oriented, measuring performance largely by the quality of its products and the level of profits that these products generated.

Today the emerging style of management also recognises the importance of processes that produce the product, and which are linked inextricably with determining the product. Accordingly, this new style of management orients more attention to process.

Many reasons are given to explain this shift in focus from concern about outcomes to concern about the processes that lead to the outcomes. One reason is crucial to our understanding: the "human factor" is now assuming pre-eminence as a factor of production. This development comes from growing recognition that people matter and that the skills and qualifications of workers are critical determinants of the performance of enterprises and economies.

The notion of process management is like the two faces of Janus, and to improve the management of enterprise processes we need to focus on managing the processes of human resource development. Thus, the new paradigm of organisational development emphasises the management processes that we need to improve production processes. In times of rapid change, organisations, like organisms, are best served through co-evolving mindfully with their environments, with each influencing the other.

The product orientation of traditional management approaches suffers from an inflexibility characterised by a singular lack of adaptability to changing circumstances. Adaptability involves innovation, creativity, imagination, and processes effective for harnessing these potential inputs in harmonious ways. The essence of adapting well involves not just willingness to change



but also the ability to learn. Indeed, learning is the key process to be managed when circumstances are changing. Just as individuals learn to deal with the changing situations they face throughout their lives, organisations too can learn effective responses to change. They need to do so in the interests of all in the organisation – to ensure a satisfying work environment where all operate at the peak of their ability.

### Organisational learning

Organisations learn when the individuals who comprise them learn. When these individuals share their learning with each other and learn to learn as a collective, both individual and organisational learning is increased and is more efficacious. Here learning is a social process. The learning organisation comprises an integrated community of people functioning together as learning collectives of empowered and interdependent individuals, all helping to link the forward direction for their organisation with the movement of historical forces in their environment.

The fundamental aim of process management is to improve the quality of collective learning, both within the subsystems that organise the overall organisational system, and between the system and its environments. Learning in this context of change is a notion far removed from the conventional ideas of education and training within organisations.

The key to understanding the distinction between the conventional and the new management approaches is the notion of learner and learning organisation as active participants in learning. Here learning involves those who share a workplace/organisational concern in the four inter-linked processes:

- (1) finding out;
- (2) determining the best course of action;
- (3) taking action; and then, crucially:
- (4) reflecting on both the outcomes and the processes as a step towards further learning.

Before we explore this notion, we find it useful to distinguish between what

we recognise as three main ways of learning.

### Ways of learning

- (1) We can learn by being informed about something by an “authority” whom we trust (teacher, author and so forth), and with/from whom we can validate our learning. (I learnt that  $E = mc^2$  through being informed by teachers whose teaching I trusted and by reading in respected scientific literature how Einstein “proved it”!) This is sometimes called propositional learning or learning (in order) to know about something.
- (2) We can learn by being instructed in how to do something by an “authority”. We validate our learning here by doing it ourselves. (I can instruct you how to ride a bicycle by demonstrating and explaining, and you can try it yourself.) This is often referred to as practical learning or learning (in order) to be able to do something.
- (3) We can learn by making sense ourselves of something that is happening around us or directly to us. Often the only way we can validate this learning (if we are unable to follow the Socratic method of trying to disprove what we have learned to prove its validity) is by accepting it to be true for ourselves, that is, using our intuition. (I cannot be sure what a headache feels like to you, but I know through experience what it is like for me!) This is called experiential learning or learning (in order) to be someone.

Note that all three forms of learning involve not only “finding out” but also “taking action”. Yet the ways of doing these differ in the three modes. “Finding out” is through being informed by secondary sources, being informed through example directly by the primary source, and experiencing personally. “Taking action” is through validating against an “authority” and your own prior knowledge, testing for yourself by putting what you have learned into practice, and reaching recognition or understanding

through personal reflection and assessment, again by validating against your own prior knowledge. The primary purpose of the learning – for knowing about, doing, or being – also differs significantly, even if the ultimate purpose may be the same.

In the various organisations with which we (the authors of this article) have been involved in process management – indeed as a result of the aims of these organisations – we often encounter the encouragement of propositional and practical learning. Rarely do we find, however, strategies formalised for experiential learning in these organisations. This type of learning appears to be taken for granted. Yet it is wrong to think that because humans are sentient creatures they are inherently capable of experiential learning and will undertake it of their own volition. Humans have to learn how to learn experientially just as we have learnt (e.g. through our schooling, etc.) how to learn propositionally and practically.

This deficiency in experiential learning strategies highlights the need for an even more basic process to be managed: learning to learn, or meta-learning as many educators call it. And again, just as individuals can learn how to learn more effectively, so too can organisations as learning collectives. This is a critical process for any enterprise trying to remain as much as possible in concert with the “forces influencing its future”. Hence we believe that an organisation has no higher priority for a sustainable future than designing and implementing persuasive strategies to support “learning to learn” – meta-learning – inside the organisation.

Most people rarely question how they learned what they have learnt. This point is quite easy to make; try writing down five things that you have learnt and write next to each how you think you learned each one. This is likely to be an unfamiliar task for most who attempt it.

The management of meta-learning in organisations is a new challenge to people interested in and responsible for the following:

- organisational development;
- human resource management;
- staff training and development; and
- education research and development.

One particularly effective way to develop meta-learning in organisations is through processes management so it is instructive here to reflect on the concept of process management.

### **A conceptual framework of process management**

Process management is a facilitative structure that can be used for management inside an organisation or other community. It recognises that organisations/communities comprise groups of people who share some interests, and in managing processes that a group undertakes (guided initially by a facilitator) it advocates group equity, group ownership of the product, and shared ownership of the process by the facilitator and the group.

Process management is a social learning process that helps groups to identify and clarify their most suitable goals and the means to achieve them. It is oriented towards change, the future and the needs of society or the group or organisation/community. Process management requires participants to be aware of the significance, productivity and creativity of group processes, and of the influence of power relationships within and between these processes. It is characterised by an uncertain environment. It seeks to empower participants, not manipulate them, through implementing and facilitating a work process designed to meet organisational/community management purposes. Process management guides the flow of events without controlling the outcomes.

Process management is more a state of mind than a series of concrete, observable events. It requires vision that is attractive to participants, plausible, unconfined and practicable. It identifies and facilitates group talents; it is contextual and it gains effectiveness from the synergy and symbiosis of component parts of the process. The process relates to relationships rather than to tasks and it is value based – hence our difficulty in formulating a definition. Process management is also seen to:

- encourage consensus with regard to identifying appropriate outcomes;
- require group commitment to achieving agreed outcomes;
- seek order out of chaos; and
- be enjoyable.

What are the implications of this conceptual framework for the practice in industry, government and higher education? To answer this question, we need first to ask if there are essential features of process management missing in this conceptual framework. We need to consider these features and then establish under what circumstances process management might or might not be appropriate.

### **Additional constituents of process management**

The brief explication above of the conceptual framework of process management suggests its close relationship with the third way of learning that we described above: experiential learning to understand our personal circumstances to prepare for further action. Experiential learning is in fact a central constituent of process management so we will look further at this form of learning and its place in process management through action learning and action research.

Experiential learning entails learning from concrete experience through a process of continual iterations between having or observing an experience, reflecting on it, and generating new understandings of it through formulating abstract concepts and generalisations (Kolb, 1984). These new understandings need to be tested in other situations to confirm (or discount) their validity. This leads to new concrete experience that in turn encourages fresh iterations, and so the process continues.

This type of learning from experience through transforming what one construes from it into knowledge, understanding or insight is a central feature of process management. Process management recognises that experiential learning empowers people to learn through their own engagement with issues, through

experimenting, being allowed to make mistakes, reflecting upon the experience, conceptualising the results or effects of the experience, distilling its lessons and repeating the cycle by trying out the newly gained knowledge in different situations. This is precisely the type of “process” that the process management framework seeks to “manage”.

Experiential learning is similar to action learning which, according to Revans (1982), is based on a five-stage model of the dominant scientific methods:

- (1) observation;
- (2) theory;
- (3) experiment;
- (4) evaluation; and
- (5) review.

Both experiential and action learning have stages of each of these methods:

- observing the experience/action;
- building the concept/theory;
- testing/experimenting;
- reflecting/evaluating; and
- conducting the review process.

These similarities explain why the terms are often used synonymously. Action learning is explained in detail in the article by Zuber-Skerritt (2002) in this journal issue.

Margerison (1991) has adapted the action learning process to management education and development. He presented a cyclical model in seven phases:

- (1) questions to clients to clarify objectives and methods;
- (2) discovery of data;
- (3) feedback and analysis of data;
- (4) discussion and agreement on action;
- (5) action implementation;
- (6) assessment of changes; and
- (7) action project presented.

However, action learning projects need not be driven strictly by objectives. Frequently the original plan has to be changed – for example, in the light of unforeseen developments or unforeseen research results, or when participants develop a new plan in response to changes in the environment or to advancement of their own insights and better-informed suggestions. All people involved in an action learning project,

including facilitators (who facilitate the group process in a workshop or team project) and convenors (who convene and manage the whole program) are active participants in the action learning or action research process.

Action research includes action learning, but action researchers aim not only to learn from their own and each other's work, but also to improve it and to change their own situations and the conditions in which they work, as well as to contribute to public knowledge through publishing their learning. They collaborate as equal participants in teams or task forces, researching with others rather than on them, so forming a "critical learning community" or "action researching system" (Bawden, 1996). The action research process was first described by Lewin (1952) as a systematic way of identifying and solving problems through a spiral of action research cycles, each consisting of:

- a plan;
- action;
- observation; and
- critical reflection.

This explanation has been developed further by authors in various disciplines and by participants in the International Symposium on Action Research in Industry, Government and Higher Education (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). The intended outcomes of action research always include taking remedial or otherwise positive action as well as creating knowledge.

One of the co-authors of this article has developed a model of action research in higher education that integrates previously unrelated domains of theory (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992a, b). It is an alternative model of university education designed to improve learning, teaching, research and academic staff development through action research projects conducted by university teachers themselves in collaboration with an educational adviser. The aims of action researchers are:

- learning more about and developing their performance as academics; and
- improving their practice through processes that include changing existing conditions and removing constraints that impede practical improvements.

Research at Griffith University in Brisbane (Limerick and Cunnington, 1993) and elsewhere has identified action learning and action research as highly appropriate methods for developing the managerial competencies and attitudes seen to be necessary to adapt to present and future rapid change. Action learning and action research are therefore important constituents of process management for both the business managers, project facilitators and for their staff.

However, action learning, action research and process management are not the panacea for all management problems. Whether they are appropriate ways to respond to a management problem depends on the overall circumstances and particular situations that prevail in each case.

### **When is process management (in)appropriate?**

Before we consider process management in industry, government and higher education we need to assess its suitability for certain types of projects. Since process management helps us to cope judiciously with change, the key context for its effective use is an environment of uncertainty. Thus process management is less appropriate in steady environments where there is minimal doubt or risk, and where tasks may be performed faster, more efficiently and more cost-effectively under the direction of an experienced manager, rather than through lengthy group processes. Therefore, traditional control management and propositional and practical learning are appropriate in environments with a high degree of certainty. Process management, action learning and action research are appropriate in environments where there is uncertainty.

Another criterion for assessing the suitability of process management is the degree to which executive managers are willing to distribute some of their authority to other people in their organisation, or whether these managers insist on retaining as much of their power as possible to control others in the organisation. The latter approach may be understandable and in an environment of certainty may even be appropriate. But it is

problematic in an uncertain environment or in times of fast and unpredictable change, when solutions require vision, creativity and flexibility for long-term productivity. These types of responses are more likely to be achieved through effective group processes than by individual decisions and top-down control. In Table I we present a statement about process management that details these considerations in point form.

### Process management in higher education, government and industry

The foregoing discussion enables us to turn here to consider the development of process management within the areas in which its implications are most profound:

- (1) higher education;
- (2) government; and
- (3) industry.

The late 1980s and 1990s were characterised as a time of radical change in all three of these sectors worldwide. The unprecedented restructuring of both higher education and the public service, at both the organisational and the departmental levels, are powerful examples. For example the Australian Government's 1988 White Paper (Dawkins, 1988) enforced, by funding implications, closer collaboration among the three sectors

**Table I** Process management formula

If yours is a situation that requires and permits:

- adaptation to rapid sociological and technological change;
- empowerment rather than control and manipulation of people;
- group consensus on appropriate outcomes through facilitating group processes
- characterised as:
  - future- and need-oriented;
  - with shared ownership by participants;
  - group responsibility; and
  - group commitment;
- involving:
  - experiential learning;
  - action learning; and/or
  - action research

then

yours is a situation in which process management is appropriate

in a move to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness on lower budgets.

These new structures require new attitudes and approaches to work processes and procedures, and staff development rather than staff training. New skills and competencies have to be developed at all levels from top executives/senior administrators through middle management/academics to workers/students. These new competencies relate to a clearer understanding of work processes, such as creative vision and strategies for future developments, group processes in a "critical community", team spirit and collaboration.

As mentioned earlier, in the long run, process management may be more effective than the traditional management model of control and skills training, both for meeting these new requirements and for developing new competencies. After all, news reports make it clear that early in the twenty-first century uncertainty marks the work environments of many, many people. This means that people in top management positions need to look upward and outward to collaborate with executives in other organisations and in other sectors, rather than looking downward to control their staff, which limits staff potential. Middle management and academics need flexibility, freedom of action, and greater responsibility for facilitating action learning among themselves, their colleagues and students. This would encourage workers at all levels to feel more responsible for their workplace contributions and to participate more actively in designing, implementing and constantly reviewing their work, or their study programs in the case of students.

In this new and uncertain environment where the borders between right and wrong answers appear to move constantly, all participants need to be encouraged to contribute actively and critically. This is possible only if the old hierarchical structures are replaced by more democratic and humanitarian principles that reorganise and help to equalise relationships within the workplace or organisation. Such a strategy has people and process as its central concerns rather than product and outcome, as we explained at the start of this article.

## Conclusion

Process management is recognised today as a powerful approach to managing change in organisations. It empowers people who share a workplace/employer or membership in an organisation. It trusts in their ability to learn and develop through their own experience and action. It fosters this trust between them, rather than expecting that they will follow passively and uncritically the directions given by others. This approach applies to work in industry, government and higher education and helps to explain the growing interest in this concept. Clearly process management has much to contribute to management and to society in these times of swift technological and social change.

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