research report

Designed for Speed: Changing Your Business Processes from Drags to Drivers
Designed for Speed: Changing Your Business Processes from Drags to Drivers

By Ron Bohlin and Jocelyn R. Davis

To achieve strategic speed, leaders must do a masterful job both of optimizing processes and of mobilizing groups of human beings.

Jocelyn Davis, Henry Frechette, and Ed Boswell

Strategic Speed: Mobilize People, Accelerate Execution

Executive Summary

Speed. Productivity. Quality. For many years, leaders chased these goals by focusing on business process reengineering (BPR). Companies put money and resources into all sorts of process-improvement programs and technologies promising lucrative business results. And, they did so for good reason: improved processes have boosted balance sheets, strengthened competitive positioning, and enhanced operations. Our research shows, however, that focusing on process efficiency alone—without building in critical traits that provide flexibility, stimulate innovation, and reinforce continuous learning—actually slows down an organization and limits its growth and profitability.

To fully realize strategic speed and its related benefits, companies will want to do two things: 1) pay as much or more attention to people factors as they do to processes and technologies; and 2) make advances along a continuum of process maturity so that their processes are not just efficient, but proficient. In this report, we first touch on the important people factors that enable strategic speed. Then, we take a close look at how business processes mature as organizations evolve, the five principles that support process proficiency, and how companies can design processes to increase corporate value—faster and smarter than the competition.

Our research at The Forum Corporation shows a strong link between speed and business results. Faster companies enjoy an average of 40 percent higher sales growth and 52 percent higher operating profit growth than slower companies.¹ Today, more and more organizations are competing on speed, and new winners and losers are emerging on this new playing field.

In researching why some companies are able to move faster than others, we’ve had many “aha” moments, one of which we explain in our book Strategic Speed: Mobilize People, Accelerate Execution:²

The surprising truth is that you achieve strategic speed by focusing on people … Many executives recoil from dealing with people issues because they equate them with slowing down: with having to wade through a morass of human emotions, questions, quirks, and complaints … What we found, however, is that skillful mobilization of people is not only a help to speed but actually a key differentiator between faster and slower organizations.
Yet despite many leaders’ visceral grasp of this truth, large organizations have for years put the spotlight on processes, technologies, and systems in their efforts to boost strategic speed. During the 1980s and 90s, when BPR was at the height of its popularity, organizations embraced an acronym-laden set of management and technology tools in an attempt to step up productivity: TQM, CRM, ERP, SFA, LMS, and so on. Large investments in these and related methods continue today. And, most companies can indeed point to some increases in speed that have resulted.

But process alone is not the answer. Our research shows that leaders in faster organizations pay relatively more attention to people factors—and to three people factors in particular:

- **Clarity:** Shared, clear understanding of your situation and direction
- **Unity:** Wholehearted agreement on the merits of that direction and the need to work together to move ahead
- **Agility:** Willingness to turn and adapt quickly while keeping strategic goals in mind

When executives mobilize their teams around these three critical elements, they realize simultaneous gains in performance and agility in their organization’s business processes. And, these more powerful, agile processes tend to boost the people factors of clarity, unity, and agility, resulting in a virtuous cycle that drives strategic speed.

**The Process-Improvement Conundrum**

In many companies, though, process-improvement efforts end up creating barriers to speed. For example:

- **In the early 1990s, American Express invested heavily in a comprehensive reengineering of all processes in its credit card business.** While many processes were undoubtedly made more efficient, that didn’t seem to help the company when its two largest competitors, MasterCard and Visa, invented and rolled out a brand new product: the corporate procurement card. It took American Express a whole year to release its own similar service. Some observers noted that the distraction of “fixing processes” ended up slowing down American Express and hindering innovation, thereby leaving it at a competitive disadvantage.³

- **In the late 1980s, Apple Computer set out to create a state-of-the-art assembly line—known as Line 1—that would transform its manufacturing process.** Line 1’s architecture, its control systems, and how it handled data all served to make that process far more efficient. The multi-million-dollar line operated successfully for a year at the company’s Fremont, California, plant, but when Apple’s leaders decided to move their U.S. manufacturing facility to Colorado, Line 1—which was 100 meters long and three stories high—couldn’t be moved and had no value to potential buyers. They left it behind for scrap and started over in the new facility. As it turned out, those newly efficient and speedy manufacturing processes were locked inside a hideously expensive, immovable machine.⁴
These examples, viewed with 20-20 hindsight, illustrate the challenge many companies still face: BPR is supposed to make the work go faster, yet all too often it seems to end up slowing things down—or, at best, producing limited benefits at great expense. (For more on why processes in general can be so resistant to adaptations, see sidebar: “What Are Business Processes and Why Are They So Hard to Change?”)

What’s wrong with the traditional approach to process design and process improvement?

**Next-Generation Processes: Beyond Efficiency**

The problem with BPR and related methods is that they tend to aim at increasing efficiency alone, without taking into account the people factors that are critical to achieving real speed. In the faster organizations we’ve studied, business processes are not only efficient and streamlined; they also integrate and foster the people factors of clarity, unity, and agility. As shorthand for “the tendency for a process to foster clarity, unity, and agility,” we use the term **proficiency**.

Consider the dictionary definitions of the two words:

- **Efficiency**: Effective operation as measured by a comparison of production with cost (in energy, time, or money)
- **Proficiency**: Advancement in knowledge or skill; progress; thorough competence derived from training or practice

Now think about how these words apply to process design. **Efficient** processes support cost reductions (in the form of reduced headcount, hours, or materials) and increased productivity by prescribing and enforcing less-wasteful work flows and methods. **Proficient** processes, on the other hand, encourage the development of knowledge, competency, and skills; they help people reach goals and objectives more swiftly, foster the spread of best practices, and create momentum around projects and tasks. In short, efficient processes dictate how people must do the work, whereas proficient processes support and enhance the work that people do.

Efficiency is, of course, still a worthy goal; many leaders would be happy just to make some measurable improvements in process efficiency in their organization. But consider this example from history: Henry Ford’s assembly line, the original and quintessential efficient process, became a huge problem for Ford when it caused him to turn a blind eye to the shifts going on in his industry: like Apple’s Line 1, it was so costly to change that it kept Ford’s entire company from adapting and eventually became a drag on his business results. Moreover, our research shows that companies that strive to increase employee engagement, alignment, and learning tend to move faster and achieve better financial results than companies that focus only on efficiency and productivity targets. If efficiency remains your sole aim, you’re unlikely to catch up to, let alone surpass, many of your competitors.

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**What Are Business Processes and Why Are They So Hard to Change?**

You can probably think of a few processes or systems within your own organization, right now, that seem to hinder everyone’s progress and yet stubbornly resist everyone’s efforts to improve or adapt them. What is it about business processes that make them potentially so recalcitrant?

An organization’s core business processes are the foundation for how the enterprise operates. All members of the organization use their understanding of those processes as a road map for their responsibilities and daily actions. Business processes are sometimes formal and documented (such as the maintenance and safety processes used by airlines). More often, though, they are informal and undocumented—more like a shared understanding of how the work gets done (such as the innovation approaches used in some organizations). Taken together, an organization’s core business processes provide the de facto framework for “how things get done around here.”

Because they’re so fundamental to the way people think about their work—and often invisible—an organization’s processes are hard to shift. Changing a business process requires that a large number of people have a strong, common understanding of the need for change, the nature of the change, and the implications of the change for themselves and others. Thus, process changes tend to be achieved only very slowly across an organization, often with many false starts, inconsistencies, complications, and plenty of confusion.

Another problem is that manipulating processes on paper can give managers an illusion of control. Get the flowchart or process map right, a manager thinks, and the work will get done more smoothly. People will behave in the right ways. Waste will disappear. In reality, however, the documented process often bears little relation to what people actually do on the job, and therefore, documenting a new process does little to change what people actually do on the job. Changing how the work gets done requires that leaders pay a lot of attention to mobilizing people. Unfortunately, too many leaders fall under the spell of an elegant flowchart and put most of their attention there.
Today, process efficiency is best seen as a fundamental requirement or price of entry for organizations seeking to improve their operations. (Besides, many organizations have squeezed every bit of waste out of their processes already; there’s not much more to gain from that route.) Process proficiency, on the other hand, is the new frontier for organizations and the key to achieving strategic speed.

Brahma, the Brazilian brewer, is an example of a process-proficient organization. Over the past 20 years, Brahma has transformed itself from a nearly bankrupt regional player into the world’s largest brewer and an international powerhouse. Along the way, the company built its management process around several key concepts intended to stimulate the rapid identification, refinement, alignment, and execution of performance-improvement opportunities.

An intentionally small group, sharing an open-office environment at corporate headquarters, acts as the nerve center of the organization. All executives are required to spend 1 to 2 weeks per month working in the field with the aim of identifying unexpected opportunities or threats and agreeing on mid-course corrections. Brahma’s chief executive officer, Marcel Telles, also stresses the need for “real-time, unfiltered, shared, and holistic data,” encourages executives to track global trends, and requires them to visit other leading companies to identify best practices. Employees have access to all operating performance data, and the corporate mission is aligned to just a handful of operational and strategic goals. A culture based on the open discussion of ideas and opportunities and rapid resolution of key issues is seen as the key to ensuring effective execution of initiatives.

At Brahma and organizations like it, leaders have designed their business processes with the intention of increasing clarity, unity, and agility—making them not just efficient, but proficient.

The Process Maturity Model

Where is your organization in its evolution toward process proficiency?

Over the past 100 years or so, ways of organizing work have gone through four stages: job-oriented, process-oriented, process-efficient, and process-proficient (see Fig.1). Here’s an example of how one company accelerated its progress along this continuum.

Figure 1: The Process Maturity Model

Stage 1—Job-oriented: At this stage, division of labor is king, and supervisor oversight is at the heart of management processes. Work is divided into functions or departments, each with its specialized expertise and tasks, and processes are designed to support only the narrow needs of each function.

In his book *The High-Velocity Edge*, Steven J. Spear describes how Pratt & Whitney, a builder of commercial and military jet engines, managed this developmental phase:

… a young engineer joined what was essentially an apprenticeship. One engineer explained that when he first started at Pratt, his boss would give him instructions, which he would carry out. Then his boss would check his work, have him fix the problems, and check his work again. When it was deemed acceptable, it went to the next boss for checking. Quality came from hard work, inspection, and rework.
Stage 2—Process-oriented: In Stage 2, an organization begins to look at how the work flows in a value chain horizontally across functions and departments, ultimately reaching the customer. Cross-functional teams are formed, both to accomplish work and to seek improvements in how the work gets done.

In the early 1990s, Pratt & Whitney advanced to this stage, seeking to bridge departmental silos by creating cross-functional teams who work together to design and develop Pratt’s complex products. Although the company made substantial progress, it became clear that it had to go even further.

Stage 3—Process-efficient: During this phase, leaders apply rigorous techniques such as BPR, total quality management (TQM), and Six Sigma to analyze and streamline work flows. Although the stated goals of these efforts may include everything from lower costs to better quality to increased collaboration, the gains tend to be mostly in efficiency and productivity.

In Pratt’s case, the company’s next move was to develop an approach they called “engineering standard work,” which involved mapping the product design process and criteria—spelling out in detail all the steps, their interdependencies, and what each step was supposed to accomplish. This was an important advance for Pratt as it helped managers and employees spot problems, reduce risk, and more clearly visualize where additional progress could be made.

Stage 4—Process-proficient: Leaders learn how to integrate the people factors of clarity, unity, and agility with their process-improvement efforts, resulting in increases in alignment, collaboration, innovation, quality, and speed. Organizations that reach Stage 4 have transformed their core business processes into dynamic, employee-engaging, knowledge-advancing mechanisms for advancing their goals and strategies. They achieve greater strategic speed and all its competitive advantages.

Following our company example, Pratt went the distance and developed a set of mechanisms for building, capturing, and sharing knowledge in their product-design process. For example, Spear says:

... activity pages were created, representing the best method for achieving success known at the time, with tools and methods instructions explaining how, when, and why various analytical and other design tools should be used ... Pratt created practitioner proficiency assessments to determine how much support someone needed in a role or how much he or she could provide. Readiness reviews determined if a new technology could be mainstreamed into a program or if it was still developmental.

Regardless of where your company is in its approach to designing and improving business processes, there’s much to be gained from assessing your current state, setting maturity milestones, and striving for process proficiency. At the end of this report, we offer a tool that allows you to assess where you are on the Process Maturity Model and identify near-term improvements you can make.

Five Principles Fueling Process Proficiency

Most leaders have some experience with the steps for reengineering business processes to make them more efficient. Those steps look something like this:

1. **Diagram** or map the process so that you can see all the steps and handoffs
2. **Identify** sources of waste, redundancy, needless complexity, and bottlenecks
3. **Streamline** the process, eliminating steps and handoffs where possible

Virtually every consulting firm today that specializes in process improvement uses some version of these three steps as the basis for their advice and work. They may have proprietary methodologies that look much fancier, but at bottom, “diagram-identify-streamline” is the common approach. It’s also usual for these firms to rely heavily on technology systems to support (or, more precisely, to enforce) the newly reengineered processes.
As yet, there is no equally well-understood and well-accepted method for making processes more proficient. There are, however, plenty of Stage 4 organizations to study, and based on our studies, we’ve identified five principles that can guide leaders in achieving process proficiency (see Fig 2). If you design these principles into the way your organization’s processes function, you can facilitate significant improvements in adaptability and speed.

**Figure 2: The Five Principles of Proficient Processes**

1. Early identification of issues and opportunities
2. Responsive assessment and decision making
3. Rapid implementation of needed changes
4. Widespread adoption of desired behaviors
5. Continuous learning and real-time adjustment

**Principle 1: Early identification of issues and opportunities**

Ideas for fixing problems or capitalizing on opportunities occur regularly in most large organizations and are largely decentralized. Sometimes, improvement ideas originate outside of the organization from customers, competitors, suppliers, or other stakeholders. Other times, they surface internally as crises arise or when teams reflect on insights gleaned from completing a task or project. Commonly, most of these moments of brilliance get left behind, uncommunicated to anyone and rarely acted upon in any significant way. A lack of understanding about what to do with such ideas when they occur is a major barrier to process proficiency.

To remove this hurdle, a business can do two things: a) proactively seek out opportunities for innovation through a regular process of looking externally, and b) create a broadly understood approach for easily accepting and responding to ideas and issues submitted by members of the organization.
For example, the emerging technologies group of Cisco Systems has tackled this issue by running an annual contest to solicit ideas from individuals around the world. The “I-Prize Competition,” aimed at unveiling innovations that might represent new opportunities for Cisco, offers a $250,000 cash prize for the winning idea plus the possibility of funding the idea as a new business venture by Cisco. Participants become part of a 6-month-long innovation community and use “IP points” to place bets on ideas. In a recent competition, executives and managers actively monitored more than 800 concepts and winnowed the pile down to 32 semi-finalists. The winning team of students from Mexico earned the top prize for their “Life Account” idea that bridges user activities in the physical world with information in the virtual world. Perhaps the more noteworthy outcome of the program is that a rich discussion occurs around ideas and opportunities coming from numerous global sources, only a small fraction of which would have surfaced without this type of stimulus.

In contrast to Cisco’s external search for ideas, Pixar provides an example of how companies can identify problems and opportunities by looking internally. At Pixar, consistently recognized for its innovation and quality, a key component of the animated film development process is the daily morning gatherings to “shred each frame” of the prior day’s work; during the meetings, peers are encouraged to comment on each other’s outputs vigorously and to leave no detail unexamined. A routine but fairly informal process, the systematic approach to sharing feedback enables the team to diagnose what’s going on at any given time, course correct when warning flags are raised, maintain open communications, and stimulate innovative thinking and decision making.

By developing a virtual “neural network” designed to identify, actively solicit, and respond to ideas for improvements, a business can significantly reduce the time needed to react to new circumstances. Additionally, as employees become comfortable with participating in innovation processes, even more ideas and creative alternatives materialize, thus expanding opportunities for corporate growth and market leadership.

**Principle 2: Responsive assessment and decision making**

Often, even when potential breakthrough ideas are known, they get moved to the back burner, because the company has no way of deciding what to do with them. Even when many organizational decision-making practices are well established, the decision-making approach for potential process changes is usually undefined and unreliable. No one really knows whose responsibility it is to propose, evaluate, or make such decisions, and the presence of multiple opinions can slow decisions to a near halt. Not only does that hinder the speed of taking advantage of potentially good opportunities, but it also hampers the flow of new ideas. The widespread belief that “no one will do anything about it anyway” is deadly to process proficiency.

To eliminate this process-innovation bottleneck, an organization needs to establish a mechanism that facilitates rapid assessment and decision making for potential new initiatives. Clearly defining roles for “process owners” and developing an understanding of process-management methods can be a start. Creating a regular forum for discussing potential process innovations and determining appropriate courses of action is an important element. Likewise, the active participation of senior leadership in these discussions can significantly accelerate the time required to reach decisions.
An example of a systematic approach to rapid decision making is seen in Alcoa’s safety approach. Driven by the CEO and supported by a firm rule that all safety issues be reported directly to him within 48 hours of occurrence, Alcoa’s issue-identification and -evaluation process facilitates a wide range of improvements to its safety performance and, moreover, to all its core operating processes. From establishing process ownership to giving employees the skills to diagnose root causes to ensuring quick-turn action on recommendations, Alcoa’s decision-making approach helps uncover and address a large number of seemingly small safety issues and nurture a culture of continuous improvement and process adaptability.

By designing an effective approach to determine and act on improvement needs, companies continually spark new ideas while putting mechanisms in place to capture opportunities or resolve issues without decision-making delays.

**Principle 3: Rapid implementation of needed changes**

Making timely decisions is not much help if the time to execute those decisions is excessively long. Faced with uncertainty and potential stress, most people tend to cling tightly to established processes and practices. Distracted by speculations on the possible impact changes will have on them or those around them, people will either be slow to implement decisions or will make their own interpretations, often resulting in confusion, disconnects, and negative attitudes toward the intended new approach.

Organizations wanting to create proficient processes must effectively communicate decisions to key team members; provide sufficient information about the implications of changes; evaluate and set new expectations; and dedicate adequate support for needed new skills and behaviors to ensure people adopt them quickly.

Tata Sky has adopted many of those steps. In 2006 the Indian company launched a direct-to-home (DTH) satellite TV service in direct competition with the government-sponsored cable TV service. Just developing the service was a massive technology- and process-design challenge, but Tata Sky invested equally in its implementation and rollout with an aggressive marketing program, an extensive door-to-door selling program, and the creation and delivery of a superior customer-service capability. Also critical for rapid execution was a dedicated start-up team, a commitment to make fundamental changes to their staffing and installation processes, and an extensive employee-training program. These combined efforts allowed the fledgling organization to grow its subscriber base to one million subscribers in 11 months, and then hit the 4 million subscriber mark in 3 years.

Much to our surprise, too many executives still think that making a decision and announcing a set of changes is the end of their process design or improvement efforts. In fact, those are always just the beginning steps. Staying disciplined about the activities required to effectively support follow-through on major decisions is one of the primary roads to process proficiency.

**Principle 4: Widespread adoption of desired behaviors**

The success of a process change is particularly influenced by the extent to which employees embrace new behaviors. Training can go a long way to help people understand the need for procedural and behavioral changes; continuous reinforcement is necessary, though, and many companies struggle to maintain that always-on stance. Fortunately, emerging technologies and improved ways of exploiting technology have facilitated broader best-practice adoption and made it easier—and quicker—to achieve the long-term behavioral changes required by process redesign.

Making a decision and announcing changes are always just the beginning
For example, the U.S. Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) created a communications platform to use with various coalition partners in providing more rapid information flow and facilitating increased coordination during crises. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti was its first test. DISA’s network provided file-sharing capabilities, wikis, blogs, and calendaring for 1,700 responders in Haiti, including many NGOs wanting to get involved. The tools allowed groups to communicate within Haiti—pointing out water shortages, directing gas trucks to sites with exhausted generators, or managing other urgent requests—as well as to report back to agencies that assess needs and determine what additional aid can be sent. DISA’s objectives were to provide an easily utilized support system that would enhance responder knowledge and skills and accelerate decision making and to build simultaneously an informational database—including an archive of best practices and lists of key people and organizations—that would help officials handle future needs better. The network is also a model platform for efficient cooperation, a necessary component of effective crisis management.

Without the DISA network, training 1,700 responders and then reminding them to collaborate, communicate, and make faster decisions wouldn’t have done much good. Platforms such as DISA’s are powerful reinforcement mechanisms that show people that new processes and methods are here to stay and counteract the inevitable urge to slip back into old patterns of behavior.

**Principle 5: Continuous learning and real-time adjustment**

The ultimate breakthrough in achieving process proficiency comes when the previous four traits are integrated into a virtuous cycle of continuous learning. Without this final principle, risk aversion will set in and processes will once more become straightjackets instead of wings for the organization.

Experimentation and prototyping are examples of techniques used by successful companies to get traction quickly with new ideas, learn from mistakes, and perfect new approaches as they go. More rigorous approaches—such as post-initiative team debriefing meetings to gather insights and communicate them to others who might benefit from that knowledge—have long been used in the military (“after-action reviews”) and are now gaining greater attention in the business world.

The practical use of evolving social networking technologies has also breathed new life into “centers of excellence” by empowering informal networks of people with common interests to share their expertise and collaborate across geographic boundaries. Global consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton provides an example of a process that instills knowledge sharing into the work flow. The company, comprising 23,000 employees who jockey for project work that advances their careers, developed a new social networking and connectivity tool called HELLO. The HELLO system not only tracks employee work skills and experiences but also facilitates knowledge sharing and personal connections. “Tags” allow each person to develop their online presence. Beyond skills, work experiences, and communities of interest, HELLO maps connections between people. It displays a continuously evolving map of the firm’s social networks, which is a critical factor for an organization that must quickly form and disband teams for project work.

HELLO also integrates a document-creation wiki program. This technology overlay has caused a sharp increase in the wiki’s use, allowing for more people to contribute expertise to ongoing projects. In one case, a white paper development effort using the wiki pulled in unsolicited—but greatly appreciated—expertise. Another benefit is HELLO’s transparency; it becomes much more apparent who contributed valuable ideas, wherever they sit in the organization, and diminishes the premium placed on being the acknowledged expert or most senior player.
As witnessed with HELLO, a combination of several techniques and technologies can form an “infrastructure for innovation” that accelerates identifying, evaluating, acting on, and realizing benefits from a continuous flow of ideas and opportunities. This sort of infrastructure helps learning, and knowledge sharing become a normal and expected part of how work is done.

Of course, without a culture that rewards learning and knowledge sharing, even the most sophisticated infrastructure will be powerless. We know of one organization that gives out two awards regularly: the “Thief of the Week” award, given to an individual or unit who took an idea from another area of the organization and implemented it; and the “We Was Robbed” award, given to the individual or unit who shared the information. There are hundreds of creative ways for leaders to model and reward continuous learning; the “Cultivating Experience” chapter of our book Strategic Speed offers several examples.

### Assessing Your Progress, Determining Actions

To help leaders rate their progress toward process proficiency and get a quick idea of which principles may need more attention, we’ve developed a tool called the Process Maturity Check.

**Process Maturity Check**

Think about how work tends to get done within your organization as a whole or within a particular business unit. Under each of the five principles of process proficiency, circle the description that matches your organization most closely. If all descriptions apply equally well, select D. Turn to page 14 to interpret your score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Early identification of issues and opportunities</th>
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<tr>
<td>A. People are expected to call their immediate supervisor’s attention to problems, and supervisors decide whether to move those issues “up the chain.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. We encourage people to discuss problems and opportunities with the relevant managers and colleagues in their own or other functions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Our processes and metrics are well-documented, widely understood, and continually tracked, so that everyone can quickly spot problems, waste, and improvement opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. We have effective processes and tools that help every employee to be the eyes and ears of the organization and that cause senior leaders to notice and respond quickly when people submit ideas.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>2. Responsive assessment and decision making</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Decisions are made hierarchically, with each level of manager having authority over his or her piece of the organization chart and no more.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Typically, we form cross-functional teams or task forces to evaluate and make decisions about matters that affect multiple parts of the organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Well-trained teams use fairly sophisticated problem-analysis and decision-making techniques in order to improve processes and reach correct decisions about cross-functional issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Leaders understand not only the technical but also the relationship aspects of decision making; not only how to make “correct” decisions but how to work with groups to raise the overall quality, speed, and “stickiness” of decisions.</td>
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</table>
### 3. Rapid implementation of needed changes

A. To implement decisions and plans, supervisors assign tasks to their direct reports, check their work, and handle any necessary interdepartmental integration.

B. In any initiative affecting large parts of the organization, the team identifies stakeholders up front and gets their input before going ahead with major decisions.

C. Most of our existing processes are diagrammed clearly and communicated well; this makes it relatively easy to map out changes and explain new procedures so everyone can follow them.

D. Because our leaders at all levels are skilled in applying change-management disciplines and tools, organizational changes tend to gain broad commitment and strategic initiatives implement on time and completely.

### 4. Widespread adoption of desired behaviors

A. Supervisors are expected to know what functional and technical skills are required of their direct reports, and to coach them accordingly.

B. We take a broad view of behaviors and skills, giving people the tools and teaching them the skills they need to work together in order to achieve business-wide goals.

C. We’ve designed most of our processes to deliver a reliably positive customer experience, and we’ve documented the specific behaviors that, at each step of each process, add value for customers.

D. Instead of relying on high-level strategy statements and diagrams, leaders translate broad strategies into specific work behaviors and then use everything from technology to reward systems to personal storytelling to reinforce those behaviors.

### 5. Continuous learning and real-time adjustment

A. It’s assumed that employees are hired with the education and skills they need to do their job, and that their supervisor (or the Training department) will provide them with any guidance and instruction needed.

B. Our culture encourages employees to talk with their colleagues across the company, make suggestions, and share information and insights with one another.

C. Many of our business processes include—at least on paper—various learning and course-correction mechanisms, such as after-action reviews, mid-project evaluations, and knowledge-capture tools.

D. Everywhere you look in the organization, you can see the “intent to learn.” Processes, practices, and systems all work together to help people surface, share, capture, and harness the insights gained from both success and failure.
Calculating Your Score

Give yourself 1 point for each A answer, 3 points for each B answer, 5 points for each C answer, and 7 points for each D answer.

No. of A’s: _____ x 1 = _____
No. of B’s: _____ x 3 = _____
No. of C’s: _____ x 5 = _____
No. of D’s: _____ x 7 = _____
Total points: _____

Interpreting Your Score

If your total is: Then:
5-10  Your organization is mostly in **Stage 1: Job-oriented.**
11-20  Your organization is mostly in **Stage 2: Process-oriented.**
21-30  Your organization is mostly in **Stage 3: Process-efficient.**
31-35  Your organization is mostly in **Stage 4: Process-proficient.**
To become faster and more competitive, organizations must move beyond essential, but sometimes limiting, efficiency and productivity targets; they must also gain employees’ buy-in to a common direction (clarity), encourage cross-functional collaboration (unity), and respond to innovative ideas (agility). By ensuring that processes are designed to serve people—not the other way around—leaders can initiate that virtuous cycle whereby a speedy workforce is supported by speedy processes, and each makes the other better.

You can transform your business processes from drags to drivers. To get started, contact us at The Forum Corporation.

About the Authors

Ron Bohlin is a member of Forum’s Consulting Partners network.

Jocelyn Davis heads Forum’s Research & Development team.

Endnotes


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4 Glenda H. Eoyang, Coping with Chaos (Circle Pines, Minnesota: Lagumo, 1997).

5 Richard S. Tedlow, Denial: Why Business Leaders Fail to Look Fact in the Face—and What to Do About It (Portfolio Hardcover, 2010).

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11 Spear, ibid.

12 Davis, Frechette, and Boswell, ibid.


14 See “Forum’s Principles of Learning,” The Forum Corporation, white paper (Boston, 2010).

Forum is a global professional services firm that mobilizes people to embrace the critical strategies of their organization and accelerate results. We help senior leaders with urgent strategic agendas equip their organizations to perform, change, and grow. Our expertise is built on decades of original research; our business insight keeps companies out ahead of their markets, competitors, and customers. Harvard Business Press published Forum's latest book *Strategic Speed* in 2010.

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