Understanding System vs. Process

Each of us has a set of processes that we follow every day in order to accomplish our job. The longer you are in your job, the more proficient you get at each process. But, you can be the most proficient person at the process, and it could still be a problem.

Why?

Each process is a part of a bigger system. No matter how efficient each process is, if it doesn't work well within the system that it is a part of, there could still be problems.

You are more valuable to your company if you can look at the system as a whole rather than just your process within the system.

Systems are typically:

- Cross functional (cross departmental)

- Made up of many processes

- Spanning many different disciplines

The best way for you to improve your understanding of a system is to look at a process that you are a part of and then look backward to determine the processes that impact you and look forward to determine the processes that you impact.

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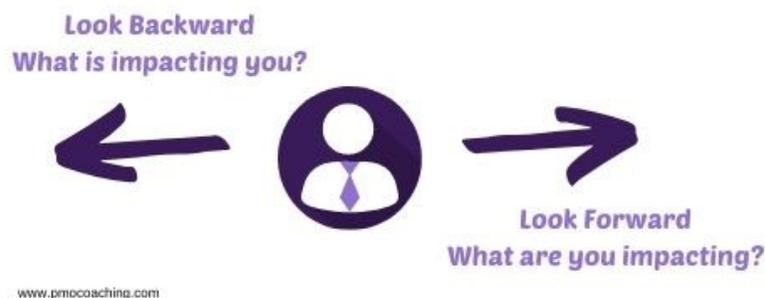
For example, if you are a sales person, you may have a process defined for completing proposals for prospects. Looking back, the processes that impact you are:

- How prospective customers become aware of your offering and determine it is going to fill the need they have

- How prospective customers engage into the sales process to request a proposal

Looking forward, the processes that you impact are:

- The delivery process for providing the client with the good or service they purchased

- The finance process—how the client is invoiced, how the payment is collected, etc.

- The customer satisfaction process—how the customer's expectations are met and whether they promote your product or service

No matter how good your process for completing a proposal is, if the other processes in this system aren't in alignment with your process, then there is room for improvement.

Thinking about one of your core processes:

Step 1 What are the processes that come before your process and impact it?

Step 2 What are the processes that come after your process and are impacted by it? Or, do they impact your process as well?

Step 3 Who are the people responsible for each of these processes (before and after yours).

Step 4 How can you build a relationship with these people? By building a relationship, you are creating a situation for yourself that will allow you to influence changes when you identify a potential for improvement.

Notice that Step 4 isn't 'try and change the process.' If you don't have relationships with the people who own these processes, you won't be successful at changing them. Go—build relationships with them, and then the process improvements will flow from there.

Want to learn more?

The Fifth Discipline, the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, by Peter Senge

How to Develop Effective Work Relationships