

TURNING SERVICE MANAGEMENT THEORY INTO REALITY

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OVERVIEW

One of the biggest challenges in business today is turning visions, strategies and ideas into a tangible reality that produces actual results. Many times people cannot effectively bridge the gap between what they desire and what is possible because those people perceive the gap to be too large. Oftentimes this statement is heard as people discussed moving into the future: “Theory is fine for tomorrow, but what about today or right now?!” This statement presents itself quite often during the implementation of the Service Management disciplines within an IT department. Service Management best practices have been captured in a framework and a library of books (the Information Technology Infrastructure Library-ITIL). On the surface, the framework and library provide the guidance needed to effectively, efficiently and economically manage an IT department. However, a deeper look reveals that the framework and library provide more than guidance, but the actual steps needed to bridge the gap between “theory” and “reality”.

THE PROBLEM

"If we don't change the direction we're going, we're going to end up where we're headed." –
Chinese Proverb

"The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark." –Michelangelo

These quotes, although written hundreds or thousands of years ago reflect a problem that continues to plague the modern world and the IT industry in particular.

- How does IT turn theory and vision into reality?
- How does IT provide better quality, higher levels of service and become a profit center instead of a cost center?
- How does IT set about achieving the “higher mark” referred to by Michelangelo?

IT professionals sometimes look at these questions and declare there is no answer. Critics of theory say it is too “pie in the sky” and that IT must concentrate on “the real world” and “tangible results.” Unfortunately this view has become a crutch and a mantra when the real answer to those questions becomes too expensive, time-consuming or painful.

History has shown that what is needed to turn theory into reality is “action”. Shortly after World War II, W. Edwards Deming, Joseph Juran and a number of other proponents of quality systems traveled to Japan as part of the rebuilding effort. Their theories and ideas had met indifference and even outright resistance in the United States. The Japanese, however, embraced their ideas. The business leaders became “students”, attending lectures, seminars and learning the theories proposed by Deming and Juran. Within four years, without any hard proof that the theories actually worked, those same “students” implemented the ideas of Total Quality

Management. The Japanese were able to do this because they took action on the theories. They viewed Deming's theories as the basis for moving their economy forward. The Japanese realized it would not be perfect and would require adjustment. But the key was that they did not wait until quality came to them, they took the first step and went about obtaining what it would take to implement quality.

The key barrier to IT turning theory into reality is a willingness to do whatever it takes (no matter how complex, painful, expensive, time consuming or different) to make the theory real. Albert Einstein once said: "If the facts do not fit the theory, change the facts". The Japanese demonstrated this by embracing Total Quality Management theory and adjusting their economy to the theory. If IT departments truly desire to achieve a higher standard, they must be willing to "change the facts" to move towards more effective, efficient and economical management of people, processes, and technology. Changing the facts will require doing things differently, applying resources more in some areas and less in others, and moving away from the status quo and standard operating procedures of the last thirty years.

THE SOLUTION

During the past five years, many IT departments have come under fire for failing to meet the needs of their customers and users. How can these IT departments better satisfy the desires of their customers and users? For many organizations around the world the set of best practice processes and approaches described in the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) provide the answer. This methodology set contains processes and suggestions for effectively monitoring, managing and maintaining the resources under the control of IT leadership that they use to meet the needs of customers.

For those organizations that struggle to define the processes, the ITIL books themselves contain simple or generic process flows, terminology and information that can be implemented in their simple forms. In particular the Service Support book contains all the information necessary to implement basic support of delivered services. For example, a complete Change Management process is provided in a process flow format. Service Delivery provides all the steps of an effective Service Level Management process. These processes are simple, straightforward and can be used quite effectively "straight out of the box".

The books also provide a greater level of granularity in the form of "procedures" or "tasks" that need to be accomplished as part of several processes. An example would be the sections needed in a Service Level Agreement as provided in the Service Delivery book. Other examples include costing models for Financial Management and the proposed structures for a Configuration Management Database (CMDB).

Even given these kinds of details critics say they cannot implement ITIL based on their opinions that the books do not contain complete step-by-step instructions for successful implementation. This argument can be proven false by "adopting and adapting" ITIL. The idea of "adopt and adapt" proposes that you use the basic process as a starting point for developing or customizing procedures and tasks that suit your own environment. Over time more detail or customization can be added or removed as needed by a particular organization. By using this approach you maintain some measure of standardization at a high level while customizing the processes at a more granular and detailed level.

An example of "adopt and adapt" is the creation of a Change Advisory Board (CAB). ITIL suggests that you create a CAB to approve and manage Changes. In a large organization a

single CAB may not be feasible or efficient. An organization can put several CABs (perhaps one per service) in place under an umbrella group that coordinates and manages the lower level CABs. In this way you have not violated the high level best practice, but have put a practical, adapted solution in place.

TRAINING

Another key aspect of turning ITIL best practices into reality comes from effective training. Creating an understanding of the benefits of using best practices, of the goals and structure of the processes, as well as a complete understanding of the best practices framework is vital to success. Training helps people to internalize the framework and make it part of their lives. In this way they rely less on the need for a prescriptive set of “procedures” or “tasks”. Just like professional sports figures, users of ITIL will soon begin to let intuition and training take over.

A professional football player can start his career by studying playbooks, manuals or rule books, game films, and theory to get a basic sense or understanding of the rules and the game. But actual learning requires making the rules and theories real through practice and playing time. The purpose of practice in sports is not just to learn the game. It also creates “muscle memory”, so that the body takes over and the motions needed become “first nature” or intuitive. IT professionals need to start putting IT Service Management ideas into practice to create “mental muscle memory”. Once that is achieved, the need for processes and procedures recedes into the background allowing more time to focus on the customer and less on the manual.

Because people are the single most important factor in success of an IT Service Management program, one-on-one training, mentoring or good strong coaching is often needed to mold the theories and processes into implemented solutions. Users need to find “practical process coaches” or mentors. These are people who have taken action, implemented Service Management ideas and can help coach others. They will motivate, teach, ask questions and support (and even hold hands if needed) both the new and experienced users as they too learn how to turn the theory into a practical reality.

TALK THE TALK; WALK THE WALK

Turning theory into reality will also require a willingness to simplify and standardize procedures, give up control and accept responsibility on the part of everyone in an organization. A new “language” that everyone accepts also needs to be put in place. A single standard set of terms helps to cut down on communication issues. The “territorialism” and “control” that exist in many organizations need to be removed or broken down. Everyone must accept the goals of the organization and focus on making those goals happen as part of their daily work. This will also help to show strong leadership, which comes from accepting responsibility without having complete control.

Walking the walk and leading by example while taking an active part in the implementation requires senior management to help the employees understand the need to standardize and simplify the way people act and talk. They must do this however, without losing the individualism that is so important in working with people. This will require an Awareness and Organizational Change effort to pave the way for a change in the standard operating procedures. Complexity must be replaced by simplicity. Responsibility and accountability must become the watch words of the organization.

FLEXIBILITY

As an organization gets further along with implementation, it must take care not to make their customization or “decomposition” of the high level process too complex. Staying as close as possible to the original processes serves to maintain flexibility, adaptability and quick response to change. Using the standard terminology provided by ITIL also allows for ease of communication both within an organization and with other organizations.

Effective communications is one of the most important factors of flexibility and in running a successful business. Poor communications is one of the quickest ways to the downfall of what seems to be a highly successful business. Complexity and poor communication make change more difficult. In today’s ever changing business and IT climate, flexibility and good communication will remain highly important for years to come. Service Management best practices allow you to ensure good communications and to help avoid complexity.

By remaining flexible, adaptable to change and focused on fulfilling the needs of the customer and user, an organization can reap efficiency, productivity and economic benefits from implementing IT Service Management best practices. Employees will know and understand what is expected of them. Management will have an effective way to measure success and productivity that can be easily compared across all areas of the organization (comparing oranges to oranges). The organization will begin to recognize inefficiencies of operation and have a standardized means to change or fix the issues. Interaction with other organizations using a standard language and approach will allow for overall improvements at an industry level. An organization can gain many benefits by taking a simplified and standardized approach to the use of IT Service Management best practices.

NEXT STEPS

In order to turn the IT Service Management best practices into an implemented reality, IT professionals and management must take action. Some simple action steps they can take to get started or to move forward are summarized below:

- 1. Educate yourself on ITIL and IT Service Management theories and ideas (formal or informal)*
- 2. Adopt and adapt the basic flows from the ITIL Service Support and Service Delivery books (or even the ITSMF pocket guides)*
- 3. Find a “practical process coach” or mentor to help coach and guide you during implementation*
- 4. Compare current state to theory*
- 5. Find your pain points and gaps between theory and current state*
- 6. Apply your basic flows and processes to tackle those points*
- 7. Measure the impact*
- 8. Gather lessons learned*
- 9. Adjust your direction to follow your ever-moving quality and customer targets*
- 10. Implement process improvement*
- 11. Repeat cycle as necessary*

Remember that Service Management is one place where the old adage “Keep It Simple Sweetheart” clearly applies. Rather than getting bogged down by “analysis paralysis” or “how to get started” issues, adopt the basic flows and suggestions straight from the books. Adapt them over time based on your individual situation and lessons learned from your basic effort. Train the people providing the services to make Service Management a natural and intuitive part of their everyday work. Be flexible in your approach and attitude towards change. Talk the talk; walk the walk; learn, love and live Service Management as part of your everyday world. Slowly but surely you will implement a workable solution that stays true to best practices, but also meets your individualized needs.

CONCLUSION

The Service Management best practices were never meant to be prescriptive. However, this should not be confused with being unable to implement the theory “as written”. The real difficulty of implementing the suggestions provided in the ITIL books comes in convincing critics and resisters that implementing the theory of ITIL can be done. By remaining true to the terminology and the basic process suggestions as presented, and taking action to start using the processes, an organization can in a sense “implement ITIL” (albeit maybe a simplified version of the best practices).

Implementing the IT service Management best practices as outlined in the ITIL books requires work, sacrifice and cost in both money and time. More importantly Service Management requires a new way of thinking and acting that is focused on the needs of the customer and the promises you make to them as an organization. Adoption of the framework is definitely more of a cultural, organizational and behavioral model than a process or tool implementation effort. The processes and tools are the easy part. Most organizations will find they are already doing many of the best practices, just using different terms for them. Getting people to take action, and changing the way they think and behave will always be the more difficult parts of implementing Service Management.