

Process Reluctance Syndrome

In too many projects over a couple of decades I have encountered a malady that is life threatening for process-based management. I call it *Process Reluctance Syndrome*.

You are at the open door of the jump plane. Everything is checked. Hours of practice complete. Lots of excited expectations. Thumbs up. Green light. It's time to take the leap. And yet...and yet...you are reluctant to take the next step.

You've climbed to the top of the big diving board. It's a long way up but this is something you've thought about, practiced, and looked forward to for ages. Now you just need to walk to the edge and put all the rehearsals and simulation to good use. It's time to make the dive. And yet...and yet...let's go back and do some more preparation.

The process architecture has been developed. Some key processes have been identified and documented. The new Process Owner role has been discussed. Process KPIs have been designed. Everything is ready. It's time to make the pivot to process-based management. And yet...and yet...let's retreat to the safety of some more As Is modeling and analysis.

A sustained switch to *process management as BAU* doesn't always happen. There is a hesitation to make the change. The arguments have been made and won in theory, but the next step into committed practice proves to be not as easy as was expected.

No leap. No dive. No pivot.

Drawing diagrams on the whiteboard is one thing, but making real changes to operational management practice feels like that last step out of the plane or off the board. The benefits are clear. It's exciting. It has long been the goal. And once committed, it can't be undone.

Process Reluctance Syndrome

Process Reluctance Syndrome is a major cause of lost opportunities in organizations around the world. It is likely the largest hidden cost in every organization.

Overview

Process Reluctance Syndrome (PRS) is a condition of commitment anxiety, sometimes chronic, about the consequences of a pivot to process-based management. The main symptom is fading enthusiasm for active process management following on from the investment that was meant to embed it in organizational operations and culture.

PRS is not an inevitable consequence of efforts towards better process management and performance improvement.

The causes can be avoided. The symptoms can be treated. The fears can be overcome.

PRS Symptoms

The most common signs and symptoms of PRS are seen in a tepid and waning commitment to the follow-through needed to realize the significant benefits of process-based management. Everything was fine during the establishment projects that built the process architecture, process performance measurement schemes, and the governance framework. That was exciting...and required little serious commitment.

The PRS symptoms that appear after the development of architecture, performance, and governance artifacts and when attempting to pivot to 'process as BAU' include:

- A general feeling of lethargy in relation to process management characterized by fear, uncertainty, and doubt about what should happen next.
- A sense that the 'process project' is now complete so we can revert to the status quo.
- Waning executive commitment (or perhaps the realization that the commitment had always been insufficient, if well intentioned).
- Hesitation to continue to actively seek and analyze process performance data.
- Loss of belief that the real goal is a culture of 'continuous problem finding'.
- A lack of prioritization of the Process Owner role.
- Unwillingness to accept the practice of embedding, indeed giving pre-eminence to, an additional set of performance measures.

PRS Causes

The main causes that bring on PRS can be summarized as follows:

- The idea of a change to process-based management is framed as a project rather than a management philosophy. When 'the project' ends so does 'process management'.
- The M in BPM is for Management. Missing this simple, yet critical, fact results in an undue emphasis on process modeling and documentation avoiding the vital need to deliver performance improvement.
- A pivot to process-based and cross-functional operations is a Big Change. Thinking and working across the organization, collaborating to improve performance, and continually seeking opportunities for improvement are quite radical concepts in many organizations. Poor communication leads to poor understanding and, inevitably, conflict and dissatisfaction.
- Focusing on technical solutions rather than targeted performance improvement outcomes takes the focus off the true objective of process-based management, further enabling discord between a project and management philosophy approach.

- Underestimation of the need for active culture change undermines effective process-based management.
- Low levels of executive involvement results in poor executive understanding and commitment, meaning that process management is not given appropriate priority.

These many causes of PRS can be treated or even avoided.

PRS Treatment

There are several very effective treatments to reduce the effects of PRS or to stop its onset:

- The three most effective antidotes for PRS are deliver, deliver, and deliver. The degree of reluctance to continue process management efforts will be indirectly proportional to the delivered benefits. The delivery of [proven, valued, business, benefits](#) is the best treatment for PRS.
- Credibility is a powerful vaccine against PRS. Process management and improvement is itself a process and must be managed and improved in the same way as is evangelized for other processes. *Medice, cura te ipsum!*
- Early onset PRS is most likely to be seen at senior levels of management where it can spread easily amongst senior decision makers and leaders. A successful treatment of this infection vector is to develop at least one process champion amongst the senior executives. This is a long-term treatment regime that must be carefully designed and executed for maximum effect.
- Communication is powerful medicine. Process-based management is new and, for many, quite challenging. The [curse of knowledge](#) is strong and must be consciously counteracted. A communications plan is not a single presentation, it must be well-targeted, multi-channel, audience specific, and ongoing. Executives in particular should be able to give the presentations and not just listen to them.
- An important antidote for PRS is to enable the spread of process capability across the organization. Ultimately, almost all process analysis and management work must be done by people outside of the organizational excellence and BPM support teams. An environment where process work is seen to 'belong' to a small central group provides an active breeding ground for PRS.
- PRS can easily be triggered by an apparent avalanche of change, a sense that everything is changing with a 'certainty' that this cannot work, so why try? To counteract this mindset, implement process-based management incrementally – just a few processes at a time. Develop skills, fine tune systems, show delivered benefits, allay fears, encourage engagement.

Process Willingness

PRS must be eradicated.

It costs organizations the opportunity to achieve mastery of the way in which they create, accumulate, and deliver products, services, and experiences to customers and other stakeholders. *A missed opportunity to enhance customer experience to everyone's benefit.*

PRS disables powerful ways to investigate and radically improve organizational cost-efficiency, allowing waste to become endemic. *A large opportunity cost.*

PRS diminishes an organization's ability to discover the high-impact processes upon which overall performance is critically dependent. *A significant handicap to performance transformation.*

PRS removes the ability for organizations to exercise enhanced risk management through process mastery. *A lost opportunity to strengthen organizational resilience.*

PRS needs to be countered by the viral spread of *Process Willingness Syndrome*.

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