

Customer Centric Processes

Process engineering, process re-engineering, process mapping.....whatever the set of words, you've probably done it, are doing it or are contemplating change. The yellow stickers, the brown paper – all good stuff....but what do you do with these new ways of operating your business?; what happens to the process manuals? Is your “shelfware” growing?

Rapid change is an integral part of our lives and is unlikely to change. Continually reviewing the fundamental way in which we do business must be a vital part of any organisation – the alternative is undoubtedly stagnation and loss of competitive edge. We have all heard the views that if your processes do not have a positive impact on customers then they should be questioned and probably rejected. Whilst this is undoubtedly true for processes that face the customer maybe it is not necessarily true for some other processes within the business. That depends on your definition of customer and how you map processes. Our definition of a customer process is anything that starts and/or finishes with a customer touchpoint.

We believe that fundamental process mapping calls for fundamental changes in thinking. And if your business truly believes that customers are the reason for existence then the first step is to define what and who is a customer. There is an internal answer and an external answer to that and both are vitally important. The second step is to agree that a process is not a functional responsibility, which replicates organisational hierarchy but is a map of what happens from an end-to-end perspective. The customer has no care for who does what role in your organisation; no interest in where your role starts and finishes and where the “other guy picks-up”. The customer wants – and time and time again the research states this – accuracy, professionalism, quality, problem solving, right product at right price and in the right “package”, honesty (no bullshit), speed and ethical behaviour. The words may vary but the sentiment is always the same – do what I want, how and when I want it!

Yet every day we see maps which are sections of a process, each part owned by rival factions of the organisation, glued together in an attempt to make them end-to-end but resulting in no real responsibility for anything and not unusually multiple handoffs. The end result is not encouraging and at the end of the chain sits one of the most important people you will ever meet – your customer not to mention other important people such as your staff and your suppliers!

So how about involving your customer in the development of some of your key customer-facing and customer-dependent processes? We mean inviting them to tell you what they want (not just through focus groups) by actually participating in designing some of the workflows. But it's a risk? Possibly – they will learn something about your business and its efficiencies (or inefficiencies) but good business practice is to share good and bad and to incrementally learn. We'd like to think that the days of designing a process in isolation are over; that a purely internal body who thinks it represents the customer and know their every need is not the real way forward. But with our most cynical hat on these assumptions are not necessarily correct. Many businesses still design processes around internal limitations rather than trying to solve the constraints; around hierarchical, bureaucratic and sometimes political principles; around mythical customer knowledge. Few actually involve the customer. Some involve their sharp-end staff – people who really know what customers want, people who know what needs to be done on the shop floor to change – but many still process map the status quo using people who can often be very divorced from what the true customer experience needs to be.

Radical thought and intervention, involvement and sharing, mapping the sunrise and not the sunset, delivering processes which meet customer needs and are real and vibrant. Processes that live and breathe and don't gather dust – processes that can be measured and are effective. Surely we'd all die for a few of those – and think what it could do for customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention.

Peter Murley