

## **The Process Approach – Facilitating Quality Achievement and Mission Accomplishment**

By Robert R. Richards

All of us can readily think of our jobs in terms of a job position or work function. It's normal to identify ourselves or our work as, for example, being an administrative assistant, educator, regulatory staff member, public health professional, curator, records manager, law enforcement official, etc. But we also want to be valued and to add value in our work. For that, it helps to think of our work in terms of processes.

Processes are not functions. Functions, such as accounting, management, filing, engineering, IT, maintenance, records management, and public relations, are basically categories of work activities. Processes, on the other hand, take input(s), add "value" to that input, and produce output(s) that have more intrinsic worth than the input had. Examples of processes are: developing a design; writing a software code to solve a problem; preparing, performing, and reporting an audit; finding, retrieving, and providing a previously stored record; developing and issuing a press release; etc. So, since processes add value in producing a product or providing a service, they are key to achieving quality.

OK, fine, but what good does having this "process approach" to my work do for me? Good question; the process approach wouldn't be of much use if it were just a nice philosophical concept. Here are some advantages and benefits of using a process approach in your work:

- Processes lend themselves to being mapped or charted. This leads to improved understanding of the details of the process, and improved communication with others about the process. Also, process mapping or charting is basic to identifying waste and delay (Lean) and making other efficiency improvements.
- Since processes, by definition, have inputs and outputs, there inherently are "suppliers" of input and "recipients" (or customers) of output. The process approach causes you think about your interactions with those parties - how you communicate what you need to suppliers, and how you determine what customers want/need and whether they are getting it.
- Once processes are understood, particularly in the form of a process map, it is easier to identify useful process and results metrics, allowing for process monitoring and management.
- Processes in work activities leads to consistency of results, stability in the work environment, and ease of training new personnel.
- Organizing work into functions tends to create "silos" in an organization, wherein the concerns within the function tend to take precedence over the interests of the whole organization. But by using a process approach, the existence of inputs and outputs (with their implicit feedback and requirements and interaction with "suppliers" and "customers") forces interaction between adjacent processes, resulting in a linked and integrated effort by the whole organization. This facilitates quality achievement and mission accomplishment.

- Specifically to state government, processes will be fairly immune from changes in administration. Or, said differently, establishment of effective processes based on quality principles can serve, to some extent, to “insulate” an organization from the effect of change-of-administration, making it less potentially disruptive. Services provided by state government are established by law and regulation, so are largely not affected by who the governor or cabinet secretary is; the processes to provide those services can therefore remain stable. Then, as new services are required by new laws or regulations, having an existing process framework can allow an agency to deal with those changes more readily.

To implement a process approach, an organization must define its processes. There are a number of mechanisms to do that, from fairly simple flow-charting, in which individual activities in a process are linked with flow arrows to portray the process, to more comprehensive process mapping, in which the “skeleton” of a flow chart is supplemented by identifying every resource and document input, all output products and documents, and every “actor” that has a role in the process. Whatever graphical tool is used, the effort to define and understand processes is basic to attaining the benefits of the process approach.

Organizing work around the processes involved in producing an organization’s products or services offers real advantages in identifying and making improvements in those processes, as well as creating a stable, well-understood work environment in which we can attain the required quality in those products or services that our customers and stakeholders deserve.

About the author: Robert R. (Bob) Richards has more than a quarter-century of experience in quality assurance and process improvement in the government sector. He is a Senior Member of the American Society for Quality and has been recognized by that organization via certification as a Manager of Quality and Organizational Excellence. Mr. Richards has served in a variety of roles, including Examiner, for the New Mexico Quality Awards program since its inception. He and his wife, Andrea, live in Albuquerque.