

Good Process Is Evolved, Not Designed

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Time management is an ongoing challenge for managers. Although there can be a certain heady rush to being relentlessly busy, I'm convinced that far more senior managers are overwhelmed with work than they want to be. What's a bit scary to contemplate is that they're overwhelmed by work generated from processes that they themselves were heavily involved in designing.

Process design is a foundational skill for well-run organizations, yet is often treated as an afterthought. Individual processes garner a great deal of attention, but we rarely speak about **how to create process effectively**. The good news is that success here doesn't require innovation or novelty: adopt a structured approach and you'll quickly become an effective process designer.

How to Evolve Process

When we talk about creating a process, we almost always say that we *designed* a process. Design is a great word, because it implies the kind of careful thoughtfulness that great process does indeed possess. However, it's also a misleading word, because great process never emerges from the *Feynman algorithm* ("write down the problem, think very hard, write down the solution"), but instead derives from guided evolution.

Here's the algorithm that I've found effective:

1. Identify problem statement

There is a problem that either you have identified or folks you support have raised. Refine this into a problem statement that captures the problem you want to solve ("We want everyone to have the opportunity to apply to lead special projects.") along with the constraints you want to respect while doing so ("We want to retain our ability to select project leads quickly").

2. Document approaches

It's easy to simply apply the approaches you're most familiar with; so easy, in fact, that it's the most prevalent failure mode of leaders who join a new company. Take some time to reach out to folks at other companies and learn how they approach the same problem.

3. Test approach

Identify a reasonable approach, not necessarily an amazing one, and give it a limited test run. The best test run **is cheap and narrow**, optimizing for rapid feedback over a perfect approach. Trialing a process within a small team is surprisingly effective because it allows you to learn whether that process works before you begin advocating for wide adoption. Companies have limited bandwidth to adopt and maintain process, so it's helpful to weed out ineffective processes early. Small rollouts make it cheap to iterate and improve.

4. Iterate approach

With your updated problem statement, adapt or replace your approach with another reasonable idea. Then, return to testing it! It's generally the case that after you've identified the proper problem statement, the approach will be almost disappointingly simple. That's a good thing.

5. Practice

After you find an approach that works reasonably well, folks often want to begin evaluating it immediately, but that's often ineffective. The first time an organization uses a new process almost never goes super well; it takes time to learn new things, particularly when you need hundreds of folks to change at the same time. Run practice sessions, publicly describe success stories, and ensure everyone builds experience using it.

So now we have an algorithm for designing process, but honestly you already knew this was the best way to design process. That's the most interesting discovery when chatting with folks about how to design process: they already know how.

Why, in that case, do we keep making ineffective processes?

Why Good People Make Bad Process

Almost every bad process I've encountered has had the same problem: the problem statement is wrong. At best this leads to inert processes that solve scenarios that don't exist; at worst they're overactive, causing great inconvenience while doing little good. A common example in Silicon Valley compa-

nies is wanting to manage operations teams with a “churn and burn” mentality, but also wanting to be a company that inspires loyalty and high retention. This can lead to statements emphasizing ongoing education and career mobility coupled with processes that hinder such development.

Designing great process requires honest alignment on goals, methodical approach, and a great deal of thoughtful attention. Without all three, you’ll rarely enact great process, and in the rare case where you do, it will decay quickly across context changes.

That’s the bad news, but the good news is that great process builds momentum for more great process. The time you spend evolving it will come back to you, which makes evolving good process the single highest leverage act of management.