

Volume	6	Support and Development
Chapter	03	Quality and Processes
Section	04	Process Basics
Key Word Tags	Ordered Activities	

WHAT IS A PROCESS?

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Quick Summary: At the most basic level, a process is an ordered set of repeatable steps to create a desired output.

Abstract:

When considering the implementation of processes, it is essential to gain a common understanding of what a process is to avoid miscommunication and confusion. The concept is quite simple and can apply to every element in an organization. Developing a common understanding and use of terms aids process development and is quite helpful when team members from different organizational elements are involved. The most important concept to keep in mind in process development is the notion that processes are for people and not machines.

The article in this series, "[Making Metrics Work](#)," discusses that measuring activities and creating metrics are only effective if they are done repeatedly and consistently. The key to both of these factors relies on the implementation of standard processes. Referring to a search engine for the definition of the term "process," you will receive page after page of definitions. Virtually all of them share common themes. Below is a definition that can easily be parsed into three distinct segments that are worthwhile to consider.

A process is a structured set of activities designed to produce an output for a customer.

- "structured set": A finite, definable group of tasks that may involve multiple individuals across organizational (internal or external) boundaries
- "produce an output": The output of a process is something tangible (ex: a product, a report, a valid sales lead, an invoice) that has value to a...
- "customer": A customer may be an internal colleague, a business partner, or an external paying entity or person. Each will have specific expectations regarding the process output.

The goal of every process is the consistent performance that results in meeting some pre-established goals or expectations. The key element is consistent performance or repeatability. If a task is only going to be performed once, developing a generalized process for the activity does not make sense.

Processes need to be thought of as guidelines for humans and are not rigid programs for robots on the shop floor. They are not rigid "work rules" in which each step must be unquestionably documented and followed. Instead, they need to take advantage of the individual's creativeness to sense potential deviations and take appropriate action. Change is constant. It is impossible to avoid variations. People

are incredibly perceptive and adaptable; relying on their instincts and not rigid structure to accommodate variations will dramatically improve the effectiveness of meeting the process goals. It will also give the feeling of empowerment and ownership to the individuals involved in the process activities avoiding the “us versus them” mentality. In the article in this series, *“There Are Only Two Kinds of People,”* the point was made that by asking people to become involved, you can make them creators while telling people what to do, and you make them into critics. In process development and implementation, getting individuals involved will provide long-term motivation for them to creatively do the right thing at the right time.

Most of us have experienced situations where the concept of relying on the creativeness and adaptability of individuals has been lost in many of the customer call centers instituted by companies. In these cases, operators are instructed to follow a rigid, non-wavering script independent of the needs of the caller. On paper or to the uninvolved process engineer, this approach may seem the most efficient and best method to ensure consistent results are obtained. However, it often leaves the customer, the target output of the process, less than satisfied.

Process development requires the direct involvement of the individuals who will be tasked with implementing the process and, ideally, already have experience with the planned tasks. Effective process development forces everyone to think about what they are doing and why.

Although there are many books, training courses, and professional process coaches, implementing process does not have to be complicated. The processes themselves should be simple, easily understandable, diagramed, and flow charted on a single page. If the designed process is too complicated to meet the single-page criteria, divide it into multiple sub-processes.