

Reengineering Revisited: Achieving Seamlessness

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Some people assume that reported failures in business process redesign (BPR), also known as reengineering, sound its death knell. We see such predictions as grossly premature. BPR will be with us indefinitely, for the simple reason that BPR, done right, creates tremendous improvements in business processes. But it must be done right.

Redesign Defined

Business process redesign covers a broad spectrum of activities, from continuous improvement at one end to transformational change – including a rethinking and reengineering of major processes – at the other. At the continuous improvement end, the change is designed to solve problems. It generally has minimal organizational impact. Transformational change, in contrast, has broad-based impact on roles and responsibilities and organization structure across many management systems.

Achieving success at the low end of the scale is relatively simple, so long as the people involved in doing the redesign buy into the changes. The scope of change is contained. Roles and responsibilities are largely unaffected, organizational politics remain undisturbed, external relationships remain intact, and no major resource investments (in technology, plant, and/or equipment) are required. The implementation effort is modest and „doable.“

Achieving transformational change is a much different animal. Reinvention of major, cross-organization processes requires cross-organizational staff involvement to ensure that the reinvented processes are implementable. Inevitably, the organization’s political balance changes. Redefining roles and responsibilities in fundamental ways is difficult, complex, and fraught with angst. Furthermore, transformational change generally uses information technology as an enabler, which often requires totally restructuring the ways information is presented to individuals and what they are empowered to do with it. Obviously, achieving success at this high end of the scale is no easy matter.

Transformational change involves turning upside down what’s done, who does it, how they do it, and the tools they use. It is all about reinventing the enterprise to achieve breakthroughs in performance. In this article, we focus on an approach we have used successfully in employing business process redesign to attain transformational change. We call it „seamlessness.“

Achieving Seamlessness

By now, most business leaders who are prepared to undertake transformational process redesign recognize that they must galvanize a companywide effort and face major changes in both the organization and its resources. Despite this understanding, all too often managers still see such efforts as just more projects to be kicked off, delegated, and allowed to run their course, delivering recommendations that will be digested, reworked, and eventually adopted or discarded. But fundamental redesign efforts are not normal projects with clearly defined boundaries and neat beginnings, middles, and endings. Rather, they require effective empowerment, broad organizational involvement, regular senior-executive participation, and myriad other techniques to make change happen.

Furthermore, the change in question doesn’t begin when a redesign is over; it begins on day one. The entire approach must be designed and aligned with its objective in mind. In implementing transformational change, the objective must be to achieve a seamless transition from the initial idea right through to the realization of benefits.

There are seven key ways to achieve seamlessness.

Plan for it. Senior management should establish an expectation of seamlessness right from the start. They alone have the authority to endorse the concept and its implications. They must declare loudly that there will be no starts and stops, and that the effort will go right through from day-one to full benefits.

Set firm ground rules. Often, at the end of a redesign, there is a delay – of days, weeks, or even months – while various levels of management digest and reshape the results. In some cases, this period of indecision and inactivity kills the redesign. Rather than permit this to happen, senior management can mandate from the outset that go/no go decisions must be made *on the spot* at specified points in the planning process.

Such „ground rules“ force managers to become and remain involved throughout the redesign effort. At one financial services organization, this approach fostered a very high level of communication all across the organization. Because concerns were surfaced long before „presentation day,“ the stage was set for a successful

transition from redesign into implementation.

Even when, at the eleventh hour – just days before the long-advertised presentation – the redesign team identified a series of issues they could not resolve, the „seamlessness“ mindset helped senior management take appropriate action. While another management might have had a knee-jerk, „time out“ reaction, derailing the entire redesign effort, this company’s management used a „seamless“ tactic. They asked the redesign team to work with them, not to resolve the issues, but to determine whether any of those issues should be considered „unresolvable.“ If the joint group could envision that with sufficient time and effort a solution would be found for each of the issues, then there would be no reason to slow the process down. The issues could be resolved at the start of implementation.

As might be expected, there were no show-stoppers. After the team presented its recommendations, the CEO was able to stand up and announce to the assembled throng that implementation was now under way.

Enable epiphanies. Management must provide the environment, encouragement, and suggestions to enable people to discover and own the outcomes of the redesign effort.

Almost every transformational redesign effort results in a conceptual shift – a major departure from today that involves a transformation of various elements of process, resource, and organization. In fact, for most situations, the potential shifts all come from a relatively short list. New concepts frequently employed include team-based management, cross-skilling, capitalizing on technology, slashing time, and providing one-stop responses.

In one recent engagement at a Pacific Rim financial services organization, we were able to discuss these shifts at a theoretical level. Both senior management and redesign teams were able to understand them and see their value in other organizations. Initially, however, they rejected the thought that these shifts would ever work in their own organization. Each business unit, each time, and each individual had to go through a process of self-discovery. Until these shifts were made real and tangible for the organization, they were seen as just theories and platitudes. The shifts had to be internalized and made part of peoples’ mental models before they could be accepted as viable outcomes. Management and the team must provide the necessary time and facilitators to support this process.

Keep the team continuous. The people who plan the redesign should include at least the key people who will be responsible for its implementation. Otherwise, you’re asking for trouble.

At one company, management took the recommendations of a redesign team under advisement (violating our precept, above) and spent three months digesting them. Finally, they approved an implementation plan.

Now they needed an implementation team. Of course, the redesign team had long since been disbanded. Its members had returned to their regular jobs, and their managers were not inclined to give them up again. So a new team was formed for the implementation. Naturally, the first thing the new team did was redesign the process all over again. They hadn’t been involved in the initial redesign, they hadn’t bought into the conceptual shifts it entailed, and they didn’t feel any sense of ownership for the earlier effort. They had to go through the process of „internalization“ before they could commit themselves to their task.

Involve senior management. A seamless approach requires a concerted effort – if not a conspiracy – to involve senior managers. Continuous improvement may be possible without active senior management support, but transformational change is not.

Involving senior management begins with an initial education campaign and continues through ongoing coaching. Sometimes it involves forcefully holding managerial feet to the fire. Various vehicles can be used to effect this involvement. For example, the Pacific Rim financial services company mentioned above used an „executive for lunch“ program. Periodically, various members of senior management were invited – one at a time – to lunch with the redesign team. Each time, the invited executive was told that the team would ask some questions about project goals, management’s expectations and limits, and the potential acceptability of various outcomes. Through these lunches, the team members received validation that their work was important and valued and that their evolving recommendations fit within management’s expectations and limits.

Interestingly, this approach generated valuable side effects. Since no executive wanted to be caught off-guard, each individual prepared prior to his/her lunch by reading up and being briefed on the project and its status. Also, because they wanted to avoid taking positions that might contradict or undermine the last executive luncheon visitor, they spoke with their peers. Thus they created at the senior level a shared knowledge and understanding of the situation and various issues related to the redesign. In this case, these lunches were a very effective vehicle to secure and maintain senior management involvement.

Clarify expectations and empowerment. One of the most dreaded outcomes of a major redesign effort is the „kiss of death.“ A redesign team does its work and sends its recommendations back up the chain of command to senior management for approval. At first reading, management is not comfortable with the proposed changes.

Management meets with the redesign team, congratulates and thanks them for their hard, innovative work, and ends with the kiss of death: „but it’s not quite what we had in mind.“ With those words, any hope for seamlessness goes up in smoke. A basic principle for a successful transformational redesign effort is to eliminate any chance for management to voice – or even think – those words. Early in the redesign effort, management must spend sufficient time to set very clear expectations about what is and is not in bounds in terms of a solution. Where they cannot be sure, they must express that uncertainty as well – and then encourage an active dialogue to help resolve it.

Specifying these expectations and limits effectively empowers the team to devise a solution – so long as it falls within the specified boundaries. It also ensures that when the redesign concludes, the results will fit management’s mental models. Management will have no cause to say, „...but that’s not what we had in mind.“

Break down barriers. We have discussed several tools used to help achieve seamlessness – and thus the benefits that are the objective of every transformational redesign effort. One final tool is a mindset: „barrier-busting.“ The concept is simple: doggedly pursue and demolish roadblocks. Potential barriers – in the form of challenges or outright obstacles – exist all along the way, from the initial redesign idea throughout the redesign effort itself and then through the process of implementation.

At the outset, the challenge might be to identify and recruit a senior champion. As redesign starts, the challenge might shift to drafting the right team and getting senior management to spend the time required. As the effort continues, maintaining enthusiasm and cross-organizational cooperation might become key. As the redesign comes to a close, the challenge might be to get members of the teams to stand up in public and voice their recommendations, or to get people to commit to estimates of costs and benefits. Finally, as implementation begins, the difficulty may shift to securing needed resources or maintaining momentum.

An approach that strives for seamlessness – by planning for it, setting firm ground rules, enabling epiphanies, keeping the team continuous, involving senior management, clarifying expectations and empowerment, and breaking down barriers – stands the best possible chance of achieving performance breakthroughs.

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