

Ensuring that process experts have a backup



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Managers occasionally ask how they can fairly evaluate someone's performance when that person is the only one performing a specific process.

My initial response is to answer the question with a question: Is it in the best interests of the organization to have only one person who can perform a specific process?

I understand that organizations — especially small organizations — can't afford an army of employees trained to perform every process. It's generally a good idea, however, to have at least one other person identified — either another employee or a contractor — who can capably step in should the need arise. For mission-critical processes, it's a necessity. Employees deserve time off, suffer debilitating injuries or illnesses, require extended Family and Medical Leave Act time-off, and (very, very, very rarely) win the lottery.

Developing Plan B before the phone call from Payroll Pam informing you that she won't be in for the next six weeks is a good idea. There are several steps to ensure a robust Plan B is in place:

- Ensure that all mission-critical processes are documented with standard work. This should be created by the process expert using as many photos and screen shots as possible to enhance understanding.
- Identify back-up personnel and discuss the plan with both of them and the process expert.
- Schedule time for cross-training with the process expert, using the standard work. Use this opportunity to rectify any missing or confusing steps in the standard work document.
- Schedule a controlled pilot with the back-up running the process while the process expert is on-site, perhaps in an extended meeting. Again, ensure any deficiencies in the standard work that the back-up identifies are addressed promptly.

- Schedule the back-up to run the process while the process expert is on vacation rather than simply scheduling the critical process around the absence.

- Finally, debrief the lessons learned with both the back-up and the process expert following the return of the process expert. Take necessary actions.

In addition to reducing the risk to your organization, there's another important advantage to not tying key processes to a single individual. It goes back to the original question that started this discussion: How can one fairly evaluate someone's performance when they are the only person performing a specific process?

Remember, that performance is typically dependent as much or more on the process used as the individual performing the task. By "marrying" a key process to a specific individual, you also limit the exposure to improvement ideas for that process to only those initiated by the process expert. That could be a severe limitation, based on the process expert's level of engagement, ability to identify waste and comfort with change.

With a stagnant process, pairing Mr./Ms. Status Quo with a capable back-up who has shown a knack for identifying waste and tactfully dealing with others might be in order. Make a special effort to round (i.e. touch base) with the back-up during Step 5 above to understand the magnitude of potential improvements. If significant, ask them to

mark up a copy of the standard work with their ideas and discuss them with the process expert. This becomes a topic of discussion for the debrief meeting.

At the end of the day, our goal is to have capable back-ups at the ready for all processes and for processes to be continually improving. That's especially valid for those processes that are mission critical. Allowing a process expert to commandeer a process puts both of those objectives at risk.

RICK SAYS

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