

On Procedural Adherence

A Kaufman Global White Paper

Process standardization + procedural adherence = simplification

Traditional approaches alone will not balance this equation

Complexity thrives in the middle of the organization where change is often most difficult

Meaningful change requires countermeasures for work culture and behaviors

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Logic

- Simple work rules are easily understood, broadly appreciated and core to successful execution
- Traditional deployment of new work rules: commanding without engaging and assuming execution, hasn't ever worked well or for very long
- Managers and knowledge workers in the middle of today's matrix organization have the greatest freedom to deviate from standards. Yet, all levels are inclined to stay with the "old way" even when the "right way" yields better results overall
- Thus, to achieve "adherence to standards", we must concede that work culture and its integral personal conduct must be unambiguously addressed to guarantee results
- Specifically, behavioral components that defeat operational intent must be managed at their source

One sure way to optimize performance is to identify and standardize best known practices and have all adhere to that new standard. This is a primary objective for organizations that strive to win in competitive markets. Despite their best intent, it's an elusive achievement for many. It needn't be.

Procedural adherence means executing against a defined set of standards in a particular way, even when it's possible that alternative approaches could achieve the same result. When standards are arbitrary, we get chaos — an environment where infinite possibilities exist and individual preferences prevail. This way of doing things leads to outcomes that are anything but certain and, more importantly... **provides no baseline upon which to build systematic improvements.**

For decades, the target audience for process standardization and procedural adherence has been the front line of the organization. Within that population, efforts are often focused on repetitive processes like those found in manufacturing. Some enlightened enterprises may extend these efforts to administration, service delivery, field operations, and so on. On the whole however, most attention to-date has been narrowly focused. This needs to change. While there continues to be plenty of opportunity on the front line, even greater opportunities exist in the middle of the organization. It's here that procedural adherence can deliver major benefits and value.

In the middle of the organization, individual contributors and teams work on and within complex systems such as designing the Hubble Telescope (a classic and depressing story of procedural non-adherence), administering care and services to hospital patients, or drilling an oil well. Complexity and clarity don't always go hand-in-hand. Comparing what should be done versus what is being done can be difficult. Only those closest to the action know for sure what is actually occurring. Even one level up, managers and bosses may be too far removed from the process to know or ask the right questions. This leaves a gap where a lot can, and often does, go wrong.

The **Hubble Space Telescope** was launched in 1990. It was one of the most complex observation instruments ever put in space, costing \$1.5B at launch. Problems with Hubble became apparent immediately. The main mirror had been ground too flat, compromising the telescope's capabilities. That error – measuring less than the width of a human hair across the 2.4 meter mirror - spun NASA into a devastating credibility crisis and a three year, \$600M scramble to implement a fix.

Hubble's problems were much deeper than this hardware failure. According to a New York Times article published December 7, 1996, six irregular events allowed the defective telescope to be launched:

- *Washers were put under the main optical test equipment to make it focus properly. The mirror manufacturer, Perkin-Elmer, was to have filed a report of such drastic action, but Federal investigators found no written evidence of it.*
- *An ancillary tool raised questions about the integrity of the main test equipment. Again, the problem went unreported.*
- *Readings from a second piece of test equipment that suggested the mirror was faulty were ignored.*
- *A technical advisory board at Perkin-Elmer called for an independent test to uncover any "gross error". None was done.*
- *A new type of mirror examination with the first piece of test equipment yielded surprising evidence of a problem. It was ignored. Moreover, evidence of this problem was cut from a test photograph given to a NASA official in 1981.*
- *Final checkout of the mirror was rushed, with no time being taken to resolve the discrepancies.*

For Hubble, schedule and cost pressures were massive and certainly at play. But, the underlying issues of highly skilled individuals operating in a vacuum with little adherence to procedures was at the root of problem.

The middle of the organization is the place where people are most vested in the current way of doing things — no matter how bad they may be. This is where resistance to change is best informed and most capable. Any successful attempt to change processes or even develop consensus on a standard here must include some well-planned change management.

Traditional Approaches — Why They Don't Work

Audits: Sometimes organizations conclude (or hope) that compliance audits will deliver procedural adherence. Audits usually have some immediate impact, but the effects don't last — similar to when headquarters comes to visit. Things improve for a short time before or after the episode, but then revert back when the dust settles. Audits are valuable for identifying shortcomings but they do little to compel compliance over time.

Inquisition: Another tactic commonly employed is to provide feedback once an issue is detected and then attack the root cause. This translates to: "When something really bad happens, we determine if it was because someone didn't follow a procedure... and then we punish them." This approach is rife with problems. The most obvious one is the significant time lag between when a process step was missed and when the issue finally appears. By the time something is detected, the error is long past and answering questions like who, what, when, where, why and how requires a lot of energy. Only a few critical events get this kind of attention and fixing them seems to have little predictable impact on future occurrences. Besides the lagging indicator issue, focusing on past events diminishes positive reinforcement that comes from the recognition of good procedural adherence here and now. Positive reinforcement in real-time is a fundamental change management technique and this is above all a change management issue.

Wasn't Me: We often attribute procedural non-adherence to things that are out of our control, such as the environment or external events. The impact of such influences can't be denied. Emergencies might be self-inflicted: "We've got a quality disaster," or unexpected, "There's been an explosion." They create immediate stress and even panic. When stress is high, focus narrows and steps are missed. Training and testing are preventative measures, but they work best when all levels of the organization truly value standards and adherence.

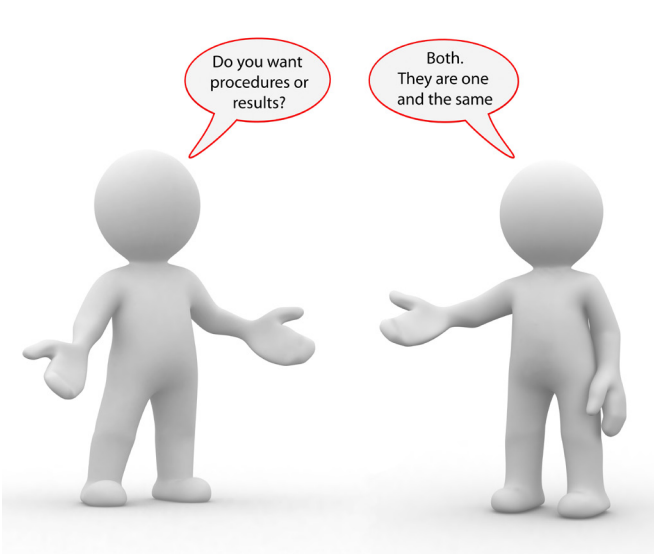


Figure 1 - By better aligning values and priorities, less time will be spent trying to fix problems that already happened and focus can shift to making sure they never occur at all.

Chronic low-level stress, sometimes endemic in the work culture, is no less damaging and has similar negative impacts. Pressures to meet near-term performance expectations in areas such as revenue growth, utilization, or time-to-market are examples. The requirement to perform often outweighs the requirement to follow standard procedures (Figure 1). Here you find value misalignment and cognitive dissonance — where two things must be done, but they seem at odds with one another. This is a perfect stress cocktail that results in bad decisions and the inevitable rework cycle later on. Unless the top to bottom values of the organization reflect the ideal that quality and speed can be (must be) in harmony, even the most compelling directives, slogans and sanctions won't overcome this barrier.

Procedural Adherence is a Behavior not a Result

A behavior is an observable act. It's something that can be witnessed. Following a procedure — or not following a procedure — is a behavior. When you ask people why they fail to follow a procedure, there are three typical responses:

Reason for not following a procedure	Problem	Solution
"I didn't have the procedure."	Technical	Provide the procedure
"I didn't understand the procedure."	Technical	Teach the procedure
"I didn't do the procedure."	Behavioral	Replace the behavior

The first two reasons are easy to describe but typically require lots of coordination to fix. First, processes and procedures that are deemed important enough to standardize and enforce must be identified. Next, training must be formatted and delivered. Then communication, reinforcement, tracking, and internal linkages established and executed. While these are challenging problems, the solutions to them are fairly straight-forward.

On the other hand, doing or not doing a procedure is a behavior, and behaviors don't necessarily change just because technical solutions are made available. This part of the puzzle is entirely people-based and

therefore the culture must be addressed with change management methods and approaches. This is where most organizations stumble, deeming it either:

- a) Unnecessary ... “that’s just soft stuff,” or
- b) Simply impossible ... “culturally we could never make that happen here.”

What they fail to understand is that this behavioral component is the glue that binds the technical solutions to the organization. So, the bad behavior of “not doing” a procedure must be replaced by a new good behavior — one that is measurable and close (in time) to the action. The new behavior we are talking about here is not the act of “doing” the procedure itself. **If it were this simple, then making procedures available and telling people to follow them would work every time.**

Action Speak Louder Than Words

If you tell someone that they are being personally rated on their procedural adherence and then you ask them to audit their own behavior, the report is likely to go something like this:

Question: *Did you follow the procedure?* (Yes or No)

Answer: Yes

It should be no surprise that the results of this superficial (but typical) audit don’t necessarily reflect the actions taken or not taken. People’s intentions are almost always good, but when priorities compete and risk is personal, intentions and actions aren’t always aligned. People intend to, and perhaps eventually will, use the standard procedure because they care about their work and those are the rules. However, answering “No” to the audit question can result in immediate and negative personal impacts. Besides:

- “Even though I used a non-standard procedure, the results are the same (I predict).”
- “Odds are... nothing bad will happen anyway.”
- “Any potential problems are on the distant horizon. Far away from me now.”
- “I don’t agree with the standard.”
- “My boss will be even more upset if I don’t get this job done now, with or without adhering to procedures.”

The good news about human behavior is that it’s predictable and can be used to improve results. It’s easier to tell a computer that a procedure was followed when it wasn’t, than it is to tell the same fiction to another individual or your own team. Peer pressure is a more powerful motivator of human behavior than any other form of control — e.g., top down, self-audit, punishment, check lists, logic, etc. This essential understanding is the critical insight that must be applied to compel individuals and organizations to conform. And in this case, conforming is not a bad thing since it is aimed at best known and described (standard) practices and procedures.

For procedural adherence to work, teams are required to conduct a compact and regularly scheduled team meeting. The meeting revolves around facts — things that can be measured and controlled. Peer interaction resulting from this session drives focus and personal accountability. This is the good new behavior that replaces the bad old behavior of not doing a procedure in the first place. The conduct of

this interaction is a major leading indicator of procedural adherence. **Leadership demonstrates their value for procedural adherence not only by promoting its virtue, but more importantly, by requiring this standard practice.**

These meetings engage individuals together in the things they know and care the most about and that are most urgent to getting their jobs done. Frequency and content changes according to where the participants are positioned within the organization. For repetitive work, they might take place each day for a brief period of time. The focus is on daily activities, standard work and efficiency. In the middle of the organization where it's more difficult to bring peers together, the meeting should be weekly, lasting one to two hours. The focus is on planning, major deliverables status, cross-functional communication and barrier removal. Never should these interactions be allowed to be as infrequent as monthly — this cadence leads to excuses, not action.

The solution described here supports other organizational and systems-level requirements. It:

- Promotes communication and accountability
- Can be measured. This is important since it's a leading indicator of procedural adherence
- Provides a means to openly identify and address gaps such as “don't have the procedure” or “don't know the procedure”
- Can be promoted by top leadership to visibly demonstrate their value for procedural adherence
- Allows for positive feedback and reinforcement from peers and managers close to the occurrence instead of negative feedback and punishment far away from the event.

Conclusion

Value is best understood where it is created and where it is consumed. In today's world of ever increasing complexity, it's essential that those who know the most about the process are fully engaged in creating as much value as possible. Standardization of best known practices and adherence to them is the catalyst for simplification and will deliver superior results. It should not be so difficult to consider the standard mechanisms for making this happen and then implementing them in a structured and disciplined manner. The organization will adapt well to this better way of communication, accountability and systematic improvement. To further ensure success, include these implementation essentials:

- The “how to make it work here” strategy, tactics and command media needs to be vetted and refined early. People have a lot of questions when it comes to change and it's best to have as many answers as practical going in.
- Pay careful attention to the business case and begin with pilot efforts in places where success can be easily witnessed (measured). The benefits and early wins associated with this approach will inoculate the roll-out against the predictable forms of push-back that occur.
- Involve those who will be most affected in the initial design work
- Don't fail to plan for structured communications and targeted training

The opportunity to establish standard processes, advance procedural adherence and achieve simplification throughout the organization is significant. Fewer disruptions, increased productivity and greatly improved service quality are a few of the benefits that result from such efforts. For many, it will be more familiar to make systems changes and apply traditional communication, technology, measurement, and reporting mechanisms. These are certainly part of the solution, but alone they will not solve the problem. Rather, those components must be combined with structured engagement and intelligent change management to address work culture and personal behaviors.

“Doing things right” is the result of behaviors and actions. Top competitors engage the organization and measure those behaviors and actions that are the precursors of better results. It’s here that we find organizations with the resolve to pursue simplification and an environment where procedural adherence is understood, valued, and done well because it is in fact, “the right thing to do.”

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