



## The Act of Poor Process Improvement

The first word most people think of when they hear process improvement is “bureaucracy.” There’s a reason for this. Many process improvement efforts actually cause process de-provements; the act of making an organization’s processes worse. What is the cause of process de-provements and how can they be avoided?

The common perception (and common result) of process improvement is:

1. New processes increase the overall level of effort
2. The level of process documentation also increases
3. People’s roles become more structured, less creative, and boring

These results occur often enough you’d think they were the stated objectives. In some cases, at least sub-consciously, they may well be. Allow me to set the record straight: “If a process improvement program will make things worse, DON’T DO IT!”

Process improvement does not have to be process de-provement. Processes should only be changed to achieve the following objectives:

1. New processes reduce the level of effort by at least 5%
2. Less process documentation is needed because the new processes are self-defining
3. People’s roles are more structured, but allow increased diversity and creativity

## New Processes

All of the processes of an organization already exist. Think about this. Although you’d think this would be obvious to most organizations it’s not. No matter if processes are documented or not, no matter the size of the organization, or the type of work performed, all of the work gets done using a process. The fact is most organizations have too many processes – duplicates, processes no longer needed, etc. Process improvement should help to reduce the number of process and the effort to manage and execute them.

## Achieving Symmetry

Since all of the processes of an organization already exist, it follows that all of the process documentation also exists. The assumption that modifying processes must lead to increased process documentation is false. If the current level of process documentation works; don’t create more. If the lack of process documentation

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**AGILEAN CORPORATION**  
3325 126TH Avenue NE  
Bellevue, WA 98005-1363  
425/877 881-0108 Office

Visit us at [www.agilean.com](http://www.agilean.com)

## Creativity Loss

Standardization and structure don't have to equal creativity loss. Taking variability out of certain aspects of a person's role can free them up to be more creative in others. The key is to know what level of detail to stop at when defining process. Processes should define fences not straight-jackets. The more you define the inputs/outputs, work time, cycle time, and quality expected of a role, rather than the specific tasks or activities of a role, the more people in that role can find creative ways to perform the work while reducing costs and increasing productivity.

## No Easy Answer

Achieving process improvement objectives is not an easy task. Organizations are complex systems. Imagine having to start with a blank sheet of paper and then design all of the processes for shipping the right amount of fresh vegetables to every grocery store in Seattle. Processes that still work when it snows. Now compare this task to your own organization. Are your organization's processes any less complicated? An improvement program that appreciates this complexity, systematically tackles the issues with clearly stated objectives, and includes the necessary process design skills, has increased odds of avoiding the perils of process de-provement.

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