The Process Cycle

Capt. Gabe Mounce, USAF ■ Maj. Dan Ward, USAF

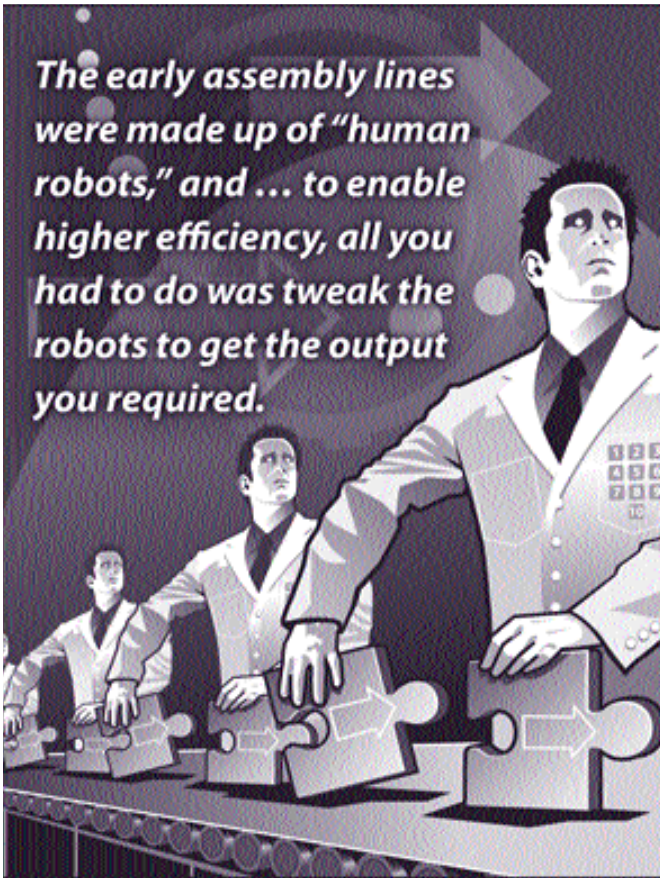
Modern program management literature is full of praise for activities such as Six Sigma, Balanced Score Card, Lean, Re-engineering, and Process-driven enterprises. These approaches all have their strengths and are appropriately credited with turning around countless organizations across a variety of industries. Process-oriented organizational methods clearly have real value and convey nontrivial benefits to the groups who use them. However, like all good things, it is possible to have too much process—and modern industry's tendency to overindulge is clearly in operation in the process world.

The current fascination with process work began in the Industrial Revolution. Fredrick Winslow Taylor conducted studies in early factories to identify inefficiencies in the assembly system. Today's intellectual descendents of Taylor's work have titles like Lean Re-engineering 6-Sigma Black Belts, but in the end, they're not much different from the efficiency experts of years gone by.

The early assembly lines were made up of "human robots," and Darth Taylor treated them like nothing more than machines in his study. To enable higher efficiency, all you had to do was tweak the robots to get the output you required. And so the humans who embodied these robots used none of their own intelligence to accomplish their assigned tasks; they simply followed prescribed orders. The more perfectly these folks followed the prescribed orders, the more efficient the work and, thus, the more produced.

This idea has pervaded every aspect of our modern working lives. Most folks simply follow the procedures given to them and never ask questions. That's not surprising—it's been drilled into us from our early school days: color inside the lines, and dot all your i's and cross all your t's. Thus, we never register feedback into the system for a better way to do something.

In fact, following processes has become so ingrained that when someone or something requests a deviation, we react like the robots from old science fiction movies: "Does not compute! Does not compute!" Or to put it in more familiar terms, "But we've always done it this way" and "Sorry, but we have to follow the rules."



It turns out, in our experience, that the value of process over time is not constant. Specifically, in an effective organization, the degree to which a person relies on any given process or method should change over time. When there's no such change, the result is frustration and inefficiencies; and in a bureaucratic, ineffective organization, the reliance on process either stays constant or even increases. That's bad!

Now, we're not saying that process is all bad. For example, pilots go through a strict checklist when flying an aircraft. In fact, the learning curve in becoming a pilot is

Mounce *holds an advanced degree in electrical engineering from the Air Force Institute of Technology. He is Level I certified in T&E and PM and has over eight years' experience in the acquisition career field.* **Ward** *holds degrees in electrical engineering and engineering management. He is Level III certified in SPRDE, Level I in PM, T&E, and IT. He is currently assigned to the Air Force Research Laboratory in Rome, N.Y.*

Illustration by Jim Elmore

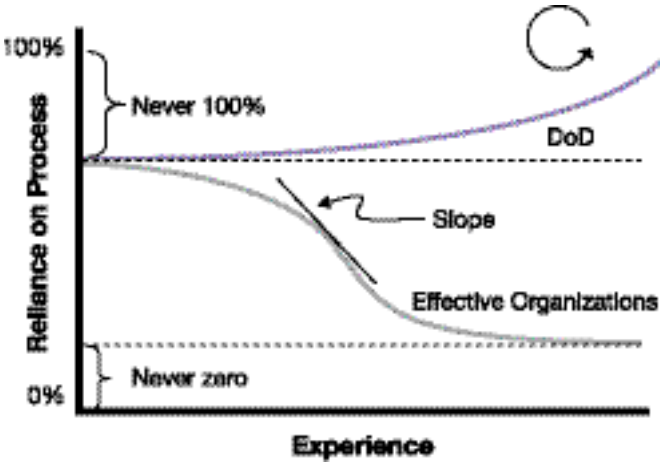
quite high because of the sheer number of standardized steps you have to learn. Because piloting an aircraft is inherently dangerous, most pilots live (or die) by the checklist.

These checklists have been developed over time with all the lessons learned from previous failures (i.e., people crashing and dying). So they're very important. And yet, on several occasions, we've seen experienced pilots deviate from the checklist when an unforeseen circumstance arose. True, this alternate procedure was itself a standardized process, a reaction to an emergency, and the pilot probably had several of these alternate procedures memorized for almost every given situation. But the point is, experienced pilots know how to fly. They know what they should do in most any situation, and—here's the key—they know when to deviate from a standard procedure.

The Process Cycle

Let's take a look at the Process Cycle as depicted below. The x-axis represents experience. Over time, as you learn how to do something, your experience in doing that something increases. The y-axis, therefore, represents your reliance on a process in doing that something.

The Process Cycle



As your experience grows, your ability to perform independently of a given process or procedure increases. In the beginning you have very little experience, so your reliance on process is high. However, this reliance is never 100 percent. Everyone has a certain intrinsic experience level, a basic tool set that allows them to function, even to the smallest level, without the help of a process.

As you accumulate experience, the curve rolls off toward a decreasing reliance on process. At some point along this curve in experience level, reliance on process starts to taper as you learn a majority of what you need to know. At this point, you understand how to do something well enough that you also understand when deviation from the process is warranted. You are able to rely on your own judgment and experience, rather than on the standardized, documented, proscribed Way of Doing Things Around Here. Thus, the slope of the curve becomes flat: no new knowledge or experience is gained as time goes on and therefore no change along the y-axis.

But you do still reference the process as a guideline and (generally) carry out your task according to it. So reliance on process is never zero. Unless you change jobs or start something new (introduce a shock to the system), the curve will continue to be flat. Conceivably, forever. But if you do introduce a shock, then the cycle repeats, perhaps starting over at a new, much lower experience level and therefore a new learning curve using a process; or it could pick up right where your experience has leveled out and drop toward zero again, further decreasing your reliance on process. This is the Process Cycle.

When Process Takes Over

Unfortunately, many large, hierarchical organizations don't work this way. Instead, they increase reliance on process to infinity, regardless of the individual's experience level. This type of organization believes you can never tweak the process enough or gain enough experience to do the job sufficiently, and they tend to distrust any deviations from the norm. They continually strive for perfection, standardization, and predictability. In fact, the more experience people in these organizations gain, the more reliant on a process they become.

Such organizations spend a good deal of time tweaking, inventing, addressing, and adding processes and procedures to their process repertoire, intent on reaching Process Shangri La. Notice how the curve goes to infinity? "If only" (pant, pant, as the executive struggles up Mt. Process) "we could increase productivity by one-tenth of a percent … gotta redefine the process and drive out all deviations."

With so much value placed on process, it's no wonder many companies get caught up in a jungle of bureaucratic rules, stipulations, regulations, process guides, executive orders, local operating instructions, and so on.

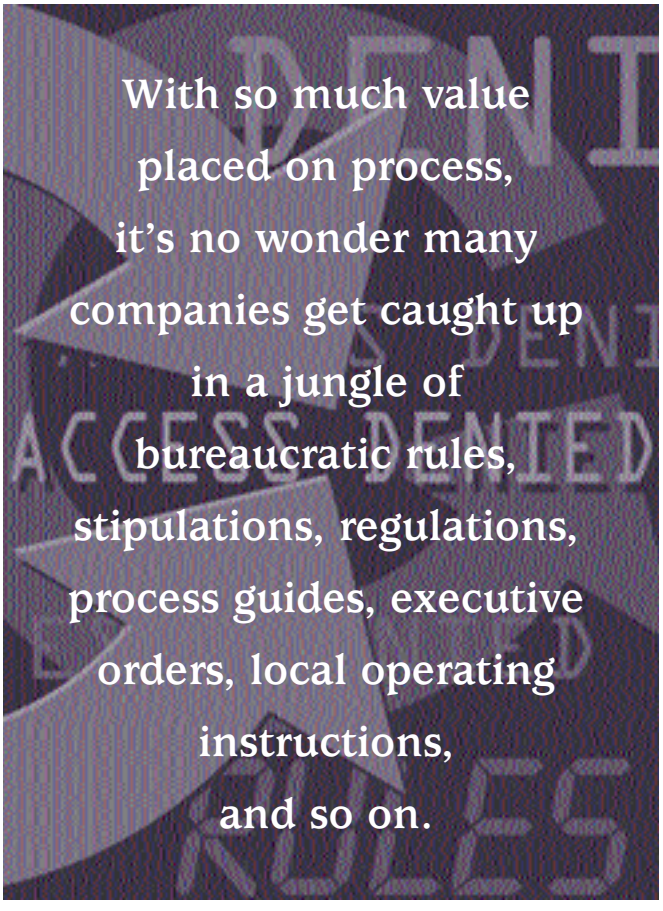
The Process Cycle Alternative

Yet there is a relatively easy way to disengage from this downward spiral and get back onto the real process curve. What is it? Simply shift what you place your value on. Rather than placing value on process, place it on the much more transcendent concept of trust. That's all it takes. Trust your employees to find the best way to perform a task. Trust the contractor your employees hired for that task to carry it out. Trust your coworker's ability to do the job independent of your control. Trust your gut to tell you when denying permission is appropriate. Trust that your

subordinates don't need your permission to do the very best thing possible. Trust. It really is that simple.

Many balanced score card ninjas might disagree, but it actually works. Ricardo Semler and his famous (and successful) SEMCO are the proof. Semler tried all the traditional business practices to make his company a lean, mean, production machine. In his book *Maverick*, he says that after putting into place all sorts of controls and process mechanisms to increase productivity, "SEMCO appeared highly organized and well-disciplined, and we still could not get our people to perform as we wanted, or be happy with their jobs. … People weren't gratified by their jobs and often seemed oppressed by them. The traditional attitude about workers was that you couldn't trust them. You needed systems to control them. Yet, at SEMCO the system was dispiriting and demotivating them."

Semler felt that SEMCO could be run differently, "without counting everything, without regulating everyone, without keeping track of whether people were late, without all those numbers and all those rules. What if we could strip away all the artificial nonsense, all the managerial mumbo jumbo?"



And that's exactly what he did! He threw out the rule book and left the decision-making power to do just about everything in the hands of his workers. No more schedules, or dress codes, or whole sections of people generating mountains of paperwork trying to control employees. Instead, workers set their own hours, bosses run their business units the way they see fit, and even set their own salaries. In fact, SEMCO's only policy is no policy. Semler's basic message is, use your common sense. "All those rules cause employees to forget that a company needs to be creative and adaptive to survive. Rules slow it down. We have absolute trust in our employees. In fact, we are partners with them."

How has SEMCO fared? Take just one of myriad examples.

After letting employees reorganize into their own work units, one unit stumbled onto a problem. In order to sell more food-slicing units, they'd come to the conclusion that they needed to change out the stainless steel finish of the cutting blade to a matte finish. But their engineering analysis showed it would take six extra production steps and five additional hours of work. The slicer would be too expensive. "But one worker had an idea, stayed behind [while the others went to lunch], and gave [one] slicer a matte finish in just four steps. When his colleagues returned, they were amazed to learn that the new finish added less than an hour to the assembly time. A new slicer was born, and sales shot up to several hundred a month."

In other words, by simply doing away with a large portion of the rules that governed his operations and replacing them with the principle of trust, Semler enabled his company to do far more than was thought possible before.

Change Your Values

By changing what you value, it's very easy to start clearing away the cobwebs of process that entangle many organizations. You'll discover you don't need huge sections and layers of people to account for the processes that govern work. Instead, you'll have people who are directly engaged in accomplishing the mission because they retain the responsibility and authority to do so. And because people have the authority to develop and tweak their own individual processes, they easily register feedback into their routine, as needed, to get the job done—something that is hardly possible in bureaucratic hierarchies. And thus, The Process Cycle is born … giving people the freedom to use their own strengths, intellect, and abilities to do the job.

The authors welcome comments and questions and can be contacted at gabemounce@earthlink.net and daniel.ward@rl.af.mil.