



Establishing a BPM COE – Where Do You Start?

Several recent articles and analyst reports have highlighted the value of a Center of Excellence (COE) for companies undertaking Business Process Management (BPM) initiatives. While the benefits of a BPM COE have been well-documented, little has been written about how to get one started. This article will attempt to fill that gap by providing guidance on a proven approach to establishing a BPM COE.

Setting the Right Goals

For an enterprise beginning its first BPM projects, it is essential to set the goals for the COE realistically. Like BPM itself, the COE is not a single step, but rather a journey of continuous improvement. You should expect to make mistakes and to learn from them. Many of the early recommendations and best practices which you define will be superseded as you mature and learn more. Don't let establishing your COE get in the way of achieving your real goal: improving your business through the application of BPM. Your COE will not have a complete set of tools and methodologies before you start your first project.

So start by defining and documenting achievable goals and expectations for the project sponsors. Typical activities of a COE include:

- Defining BPM methodologies and best practices
- Providing reusable tools and templates
- Ensuring consistency of BPM projects with applicable corporate standards
- Providing expertise in the use of the selected tools
- Providing guidance and performing reviews for all projects

In general, the COE will not perform development activities in support of specific projects. Project teams must not assume that COE staff is a resource for completing their projects. Rather, the benefits the COE provides to each project are primarily in the areas of project acceleration and risk mitigation. By providing proven approaches and reusable components, the COE will accelerate the delivery schedule of each project. By providing guidance and reviews it will help the teams avoid pitfalls, and thereby reduce the risk of each project.

Now that we have defined the goals and expectations for the COE, we can explore a process to achieve those goals. Depending on the maturity of your existing development processes, you may already have many applicable policies and procedures in place. Wherever possible, you should treat BPM projects the same as other software development projects. Your existing tools for configuration management and version control will work with BPM. At a high level your policies for testing and acceptance are applicable. Start by reviewing all of your existing tools, policies and procedures to determine which are applicable to BPM, and to identify gaps which need to be filled. Use your vendor's consulting staff to help start your COE, but use them sparingly. They are the best source of deep product expertise, and probably have insights based on experience with similar organizations, but they do not know your people, culture and



values. Limit use of them to the tasks for which they are the best resource, not as a substitute for resources you already have in-house.

Staffing the Team

The next step is to identify people to staff the COE. For most COE team members, that will only be a part time assignment. Management commitment to schedule the time for COE activities is critical. Consider two primary aspects when staffing the team, first personality traits, then roles and specific skills. Personality is the first consideration because it is the more critical in determining the success of your COE, and its impact on your BPM efforts. Attitudes towards BPM, or any big change for that matter, will vary widely within any organization. Some will be enthusiastic, many will be neutral or undecided, and a few will be hostile or feel threatened. Only people in the first category belong in the COE. Establishing a COE and implementing the initial BPM projects are challenging tasks which are likely to suffer many unexpected setbacks. The key team members must have the belief to allow them to carry on to the goal. Initiative is a key characteristic. This is, by definition, new territory. The team can't rely on what worked in the past. The COE will need to set its own priorities and objectives, typically with insufficient information. You need people who will figure out on their own what to do, then follow through and do it. The other critical characteristic is leadership. The COE will not control project budgets or staff. It will depend on soft skills to influence people without direct authority. The COE team needs the respect and trust of the organization.

Now let's examine the roles typically associated with a BPM COE. First is the BPM executive sponsor. This person is not really a member of the COE, but his or her role in supporting it is critical. They will spend very little time on the BPM initiative, but are the final authority when decisions cannot be resolved below. This individual typically comes from the business side, not IT, and should be responsible for a large portion of the business operations. The executive sponsor controls the BPM project budgets, and it is his or her organization which realizes the benefits. The next key role is the visionary. This is someone with deep understanding of the current business operations, and the vision of how it can be improved by BPM. This person will play a key role in selecting and prioritizing projects, and in selling the concept throughout the organization. Within the development teams, a key aspect is to keep the technical people focused on the business value, not the technology. A similar role on the IT side is the expert in the existing corporate infrastructure. Nearly all BPM solutions interact with existing IT resources. Operational support for BPM typically comes from existing operations groups. Success with BPM depends on smooth interaction with the existing IT infrastructure, policies and procedures. The person in this role must have broad knowledge of the current IT operations and good contacts throughout the IT organization. The final required role is the BPM tool specialist. Initially, this will most likely be someone from the vendor's consulting team. They bring a depth of product knowledge which would probably never be equaled without their assistance. Over time, this role can be transitioned in-house, but on-going participation of the vendor is helpful. They will have advance knowledge of future product directions and can advise your team on how to maximize the benefits of their tool. Several other roles are often included, but not absolutely essential; their importance will depend on the size of your initiative and the



culture of your organization. The COE often includes a full time business analyst. This person is not assigned to any particular project, but provides oversight to all, with the responsibility is to ensure consistency across all projects. For smaller initiatives, the visionary may also fill this role. Another common role is the BPM tool developer. This person develops customizations and extensions to the core tool for use in multiple projects. Occasionally, this person may also develop components for a specific project, but while doing that they are not acting as a member of the COE. This role is often staffed intermittently as needed.

Getting Up and Running

Now that we have defined the goals, expectations and staffing for the COE, how do we actually get it up and running? This presents a bit of a “chicken and egg” problem. If you try to establish the COE and define best practices before your first project, then the COE is working in the dark, with no prior experience to build on. On the other hand, if you wait until the organization has the experience, you increase the odds of early projects failing. The solution is to start in parallel. As discussed above, you probably have many applicable policies in place from other technologies. The COE can start by identifying these, and documenting their application to BPM. The COE should also provide a significant percentage of the staffing for the initial project. Vendor consulting resources can also be valuable during the initial project to help the team avoid pitfalls and accelerate the schedule. Having heavy COE participation in the first project is mutually beneficial. The project team gets the best available resources, and the COE gets first hand experience.

As the organization gets more experience with BPM in general and the specific tools selected, the relationship between the COE and individual project teams will evolve. Over time, the COE repository of methodologies and best practices will grow. Project teams will increasingly be staffed with experienced BPM developers. The need for active day-to-day COE participation in projects should diminish. The role will be more oversight and mentoring. At a minimum, the COE should participate in the project kick-off to establish the working relationship. It should participate in requirements, design and code reviews, and it should lead a “lessons learned” session after project completion. This step is often skipped for terminated projects, but that is a mistake as learning those lessons is even more important than identifying what worked for successful projects. It is the only way to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Finally, there is the interaction of the BPM COE with the broader IT organization. The impact of BPM will be pervasive throughout the IT organization. If your organization is making the investment in a BPM COE, you likely have similar organizations supporting other technologies. The BPM COE should have regular liaison with all of these organizations.

This article has attempted to outline an approach for establishing a BPM COE which is based on a methodology that has been proven in the field across many organizations. These are not absolute truths, but should be taken as guidelines and adapted to the specific circumstances of your organization. To quickly summarize the critical points: Don't wait, get started today. Set reasonable expectations. It is OK to make mistakes if you learn from them. Demonstrate high level management commitment. Staff the COE



with the best available people according to the criteria identified here. Use the vendor or other outside experts only as necessary. Most importantly, when initiating a BPM Center of Excellence, plan on a journey of continuous evolution and improvement.

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