Sponsoring Process Improvement

Col. Henry M. Mason
U.S. Air Force

In 1997, WR-ALC/LU initiated an internal process improvement effort based on the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) SA-CMM. Our goals were to institute a process for continuous process improvement, to become a knowledgeable and efficient acquisition organization, and to achieve SA-CMM Level 2 within 18 months. The aim of our improvement effort, which we called ASPIRE (Acquisition and Sustainment Process Improvement/Re-engineering Effort), was to improve the software acquisition and sustainment processes of the System Program Office (SPO), including the ability to:

- Acquire and deliver systems in less time.
- Reduce development costs.
- Reduce lifecycle costs.
- Deliver highly reliable software-intensive systems that meet the needs of our customers.

This article shares what the directorate has learned from this effort to date, which is, that process improvement is harder than it may appear.

Process Improvement

On June 27, 1997, LU completed an SA-CMM-based assessment for internal process improvement and finalized the results in a Findings and Recommendations Report prepared in August 1997. With the help of the SEI and the Software Technology Support Center (STSC), we clarified the roles and responsibilities of our Management Steering Group (MSG) to provide management and direction and our System Process Improvement Network (SPIN).

I expected that institutionalization of process improvement would take about three years. I would be at WR-ALC/LU for three years, so I thought we had a chance to make a good start. My goal was to make process improvement a significant enough part of daily processes and create sufficient momentum so the SPO would have a reasonable chance to sustain process improvement beyond my tenure.

To reinforce the message that process improvement should be a normal part of its everyday work, the organization has been extremely careful not to make process improvement a program. Reengineering was a program; TQM was a program, and I did not want to make the “program” mistake again. While at the Power Institute, I wrote a book on TQM and how it could be used on the flight line [1]. At that time, TQM literature was not extensive. I found that when TQM failed—which it most often did—it was because it gave people tools before it identified the problems the tools were intended to solve. As a result, people used these tools to fix annoyances: “Let’s get rid of staff meetings and repave the parking lot.” With its focus on improvement of the software acquisition process, the SA-CMM seemed to be a way to keep the implementation of TQM grounded in real, immediately pressing problems.

Allocating and Committing Resources: Process Improvement in the Context of Crisis Management

There is an old saying, “If you always do what you did, you always get what you got.” It can be particularly difficult to change old habits in an organization in which everything is crisis management. As a Special Operations Forces (SOF) organization, WR-ALC/LU is, by necessity, highly skilled at crisis management.
In the language of the SEI CMMs, we were a typical Level 1 organization—ours was a culture of institutionalized heroism. But in a culture of heroism, nothing gets better, heroes retire, and their skills retire with them. Ironically, we found that our skill at crisis management was a liability when it came to instituting process improvement. Employees had a tendency to say, “I don’t have time for this quality stuff; I have a job to do.”

In light of this tendency, we established a rule that never would more than 5 percent of our total SPO resources be devoted to process improvement. This rule gave me a powerful way to combat resistance. Whenever someone complained about the overhead that process improvement would add, I would say, “Surely you can do your work with 95 percent of your resources.” In practice, we have never used more than 4 percent of our resources on process improvement, and we averaged around 2.5 percent. I did not take much of their resources. If I had pushed employees harder—to dedicate around 5 percent to 6 percent—I would have overtaxed them. On the other hand, an effort of about 1 percent would not be enough to support improvement. At the 2.5 percent level, I knew that we would make steady, measured progress without burning out. I also knew that the effort would not fizzle out and die.

Metrics and Process Improvement

Metrics are important to project success; however, a manager who manages only with metrics is probably easy to deceive. I have discovered that things that are easy to measure are often not particularly important, and things that are the most difficult to measure tend to be the most important. For example, I check the schedules of the PATs against their progress, and I listen to everybody in the MG meetings to gauge attitudes about how well senior staff is integrating improvement into how we do business. I believe attitudes are probably the most important barometer of success. A metric I track carefully is the amount of effort we spend on process improvement across the SPO. This metric tells me if the effort is increasing, decreasing, or staying about the same.

To reinforce the idea that we could improve our processes and not place too much strain on our resources, I had to demonstrate my willingness as a leader to apply the resources that I controlled to the effort. For example, to convey that the MG was not add-on work, I released employees from private staff meetings to participate in the MG. Setting a bound on resource commitments sent the message that process improvement is not a periodic, overwhelming demand on the employees’ time that has a beginning and an end but is the normal way we do business. The MG is now perceived as a part of everyday work processes.

Sponsorship

Process improvement efforts are a constant test of senior leadership. You have to back up your talk with actions and you cannot waver. If leadership waivers and process improvement moves down the scale of importance, the effort will die. Additionally, if sponsors establish and reinforce a vision for the effort, they move beyond passive endorsement to active sponsorship.

Although we faced challenges, such as increased competition and a potential loss of market share, we did not have a significant emotional event to trigger process improvement changes. When your livelihood and your life do not depend on change, it is an uphill battle to sustain commitment for process improvement; therefore, it was essential to remind everyone at least every six months, via correcting meetings called “visioning” sessions, where we were going and why we were going there.

To sustain commitment is most difficult in the early stages of the effort, before there are tangible results you can touch, feel, or sense. Therefore, leadership must strike a balance between patience and active engagement.

If you are the type of leader who relies only on the evidence available to your senses, you will fail. In the beginning, everything is intuitive and conceptual, and leaders must be willing to let the process percolate and allow employees to find their own solutions to the problems they encounter. I adapted our processes to this new way of operating. If I had pushed too hard in the early days of our effort, we may have achieved some ephemeral success, written it up, congratulated ourselves, and terminated the program. I believe patience is the most essential quality for the leader of a process improvement effort. If you do not have patience, it is best not to go through the pain. Abort early and avoid the rush.

On the other hand, the leader must also know when to push. If anything, I probably erred on the side of patience. Attempting to see if the effort could sustain itself with minimal intervention in the MG, I stepped back too far too soon. For four or five months in the second year of the effort, I was not actively engaged in the process. Eventually, the SPIN team let me know that the effort needed my active participation.

Visioning

In March 1998, at a meeting of the MG, we held our first visioning session. We formulated a vision of an improved organization, a picture of what it would be like to work in that organization, and a list of the expected payoffs. This strategy required the MG to be directly involved in the improvement process. At this meeting, I addressed the staff: “I am willing to quit right now. If you don’t want to do this, we’ll stop. You know why I think it’s important. I’m not going to be here forever. We don’t need to drag this out until I retire 18 months from now. If you continue, things will get better, and you’ll see many of the benefits I’ve been preaching about. But we don’t have to do this. I am willing to disband the SPIN team and cancel all the PATs, and we’ll go back to what we were doing. If you see long-term benefits for the SPO and for yourselves, then I want you to make the commitment. But you will have to agree to support the PATs. The decision is yours.” And I left it to them to decide. This meeting became a watershed when the rest of the MG, without my influence and after much discussion, decided to continue the improvement effort.

Prior to this meeting, the PATs had not produced anything, and enthusiasm...
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O 0-ALC/TISE
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Voice: 801-777-7411 DSN 777-7411
Fax: 801-775-4932 DSN 775-4932
E-mail: dovenbad@software.hill.af.mil
W adel@software.hill.af.mil
Internet: http://www.jawswg.hill.af.mil

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for the effort began to wane. We had found lots of ways to do nothing. The PATs realized that a group that works for only two hours every week will get little done over a long period of time. Eventually, we implemented an approach where employees would block out two weeks and cram; however, you must plan for and schedule these concentrated meetings at least three months in advance because most employees’ calendars are full in the near term. PAT and SPIN productivity was the result of teams maturing as they went deeper into process development.

Since the visioning session and the changes initiated by the SPIN and the PATs, I have noticed much more enthusiasm from employees. PATs have begun to complete their work, and the results have been encouraging. For example, the first PAT, Acquisition Life Cycle Checklist (ALCC), dealt with the SA-CMM in general terms. We developed a checklist of every action necessary to add new capability or to enhance an existing capability on SOF weapons systems (concept development through system life sustainment). The checklist applied to all disciplines in the SPO. For the first time, we had a comprehensive layout of this extremely complex process. We used the ALCC to develop program management plans and schedules, as an on-the-job training tool, and as a management tool to track program progression from development through system installation. The checklist and associated training were well received by the workforce; one software engineer with 15 years experience commented that she wished she had the checklist 15 years ago.

Our second PAT, Software Fielding Process, dealt with an acute LU problem. Acquisition reform and base realignment had removed the infrastructure that supported new software distribution to the warfighter. This PAT developed a process to immediately disseminate software through a password-protected, secure Web site. User organizations have successfully tested the system and are excited about the immediate accessibility they now have. With this new process, software changes can be available to user organizations within hours of software acceptance.

Another sign of growing acceptance is that those who participated in the early PATs have volunteered to join new PATs. Our ongoing PATs address risk management, standardized cost estimation, training, and solicitation policy and planning. At the staff’s request, I did not attend our “revisioning” session held in October 1998. As they wrestled with commitment to ASPIRE, as well as meeting the demands of day-to-day challenges, the staff wanted the freedom to air their problems, differences, and gripes and develop their plan to help manage the organization. The results were especially satisfying. Each senior manager accepted the challenge to wholeheartedly support ASPIRE and manage the SPO business as a unified group, now identified as the Management Working Group (MWG). The MWG meets monthly without my direct intervention, and the MG meetings are now quarterly sessions. To keep our direction on track, I provide coaching and steering that is in line with our SOF SPO mission and goals. At our next revisioning session, we will check our progress by identifying what has and has not been working and what we need to change in our approach.

I have no doubt that there will be another period after the early successes have been achieved and instituted when everyone says, “O kay, now we are done.” The idea has not yet fully sunk in that we have a system for process improvement. If something is wrong with our work processes, we can feed the problem into the new system and allow the system to take care of it and come out with a new process that is implemented, reviewed, and updated. Our organization will not have sufficient confidence in our processes until we realize that process improvement is forever.
Lessons Learned
To summarize, following are some key lessons I learned as sponsor of our process improvement effort.

• Do not characterize process improvement as a separate "program"; characterize it as the normal way of doing business.
• Spend no more than 5 percent of total organizational resources on the improvement effort.
• To monitor progress of the effort, track resources spent on improvement, track PAT progress against schedules, and pay attention to attitude changes.
• Whenever possible, demonstrate your commitment by applying resources that you control to the effort.
• Clearly identify and communicate the problems that process improvement are intended to solve.
• Establish a vision for the effort, and at least every six months, reinforce the vision and the commitment to achieving it.

• Enable PATs to meet for concentrated periods; schedule the meeting times several months in advance.
• Find the right balance between patience and active engagement.

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About the Author
Col. Henry M. Mason
is the director of SOF SPO at Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, Robins Air Force Base, Ga. He is the single authority for fleet management for the U.S. Special Operations Command and Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command for fixed-wing aircraft. He directs more than 420 personnel at Robins Air Force Base and at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, and he directs more than 20 contractor support agencies.

Mason has a bachelor's degree in engineering management from the U.S. Air force Academy, a master's degree in business administration from the University of California at Los Angeles, and is a graduate of the Air War College, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala. He is a command pilot with more than 2,000 flying hours, and he has commanded at the squadron and group level. His duty assignments include operational flying, flight safety, aircraft maintenance, logistics, and acquisition program management.

Point of Contact
Chuck Idone
226 Cochran Street
Robins AFB, GA 31098
Voice: 912-926-6078
E-mail: cidone@lu.robins.af.mil

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