Bill Fox Interview with Susan Page

Establish a Clear Upfront Contract for Process Improvement Success

April 20, 2012

Bill: It's my pleasure to be talking with Susan Page, author of the recently published and popular book, *The Power of Business Process Improvement: 10 Simple Steps to Increase Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Adaptability*. I learned about Susan's work last January when her book appeared on the hot new releases section on Amazon, alongside *5 Minutes to Process Improvement Success*. Since that time I've gotten to know Susan through her insightful book and her to-the-point blog posts. Because of her insight, I'm looking forward to asking her the opening question: What is your best process improvement strategy or tactic that has worked really well for you or your clients?

Susan: I would say contracting. I think whether you're talking about process improvement or another type of project, having a contract can help you to stay on track. In my book, I refer to this contract as a "scope definition document." I chose that name intentionally because I think everyone can relate to the concept of controlling scope.

A *scope definition document* sounds less threatening than a contract, but at the end of the day, that's really what you have. It gives you a tool that you can use to stay on track as the process improvement effort continues moving forward. Having this document helps you set the foundation for any process improvement effort because it sets the boundaries, and identifies the client or customer and what they want from the process, among other things.

To having a meaningful *scope definition document* though, you have to build it as a team with input from everyone involved in the improvement effort, including the project sponsor. It is important that everybody feels they have a chance to contribute to the document.

Bill: Susan, that's quite interesting because your approach is not at all what I expected from reading your book.

However, your focus on scope is really resonating for me because on several occasions I have found myself getting involved in managing a project that was experiencing a few

challenges. I can say without fail that in each and every one of those projects the scope was either missing in written form or lacked a sufficiently detailed scope document.

While it seems to be such a small component in the scheme of the entire project, I think it gets left behind in the rush to start the project. When a scope definition document is missing, the project will have a lack of focus, changing scope, and disorganization. On the other hand, when a scope definition document is added, it seems to have an almost miraculous impact on getting a project back on track and moving forward.

Susan: Absolutely. Having a *scope definition document* helps to move a project along, as long as you allow the time to let people give feedback and have discussion. How many times have you been on a project when half way through the project, someone wants to add something additional? The *scope definition document* allows you to flush out, upfront, what's in scope, and what's out of scope. If you intentionally exclude something, you have a vehicle to capture the decision. The *scope definition document* provides you with the ammunition you require to feel comfortable saying "no."

Another benefit of creating this document as a team is that the team develops a common language. Issues surface in a process improvement effort like terminology. Spending time at the beginning of a process improvement effort discussing language only helps the team later on in the work. As a facilitator, I walk into a lot of situations where I do not know the client's business. When I first started working in the health care industry as a consultant, I did not know many of the terms they used. The *scope definition document* gave me the opportunity to clarify at the very front end of a project what specific terms meant, so that to the customer it appeared as a normal part of the process, not as if I did not understand their business.

You would think that a project team could easily create a **definition** of a business process, but I have seen teams struggle with this seemingly easy task because everyone does not think the same or use words in the same way, especially with a global team. Is there a difference, for example, between an "applicant" and a "candidate?" Building the *scope definition document* together helps everyone to get on the same page.

To me, creating this document is the most important steps. As a facilitator I may skip some steps based on the situation, but I never, ever skip developing a *scope definition document*.

Bill: I would agree, Susan. It's a critical part of the project, and I think highlighting it here has reinforced its importance for me, and I think even more so for a process improvement

type of project. I know in your book you mention very specific components that should be included. Can you talk a little bit more about that and what your concerns are?

Susan: I approach each situation differently because they vary depending on the experience level of the team, and the sponsor's goals for the work. Generally, I know something about the environment I'm walking into, and I'll know if there are challenges because I meet with the sponsor to try to understand some of the people dynamics I may face. So for me, it's not just the work, but it's about facilitating a group of people - some who do not want to play.

In thinking about the components of the *scope definition document*, they differ from a typical project methodology that has documents like a charter, status plan, project plan, risk assessment, and stakeholder analysis. For a process improvement project, the tools change and it's important to develop a process definition, identify the boundaries so you know where the process begins and ends, define the client or customer and their needs, and discuss the measurements of success. All of these components reside on the *scope definition document* and help you to avoid scope creep as the project progresses.

I just mentioned measurements of success and I think this topic deserves a little more explanation. At the beginning of a process improvement project, I intentionally only ask the project team **what** they will measure, not **how** they will measure something. I find them more open to defining success (which should come from the client or customer's perspective) without worrying about the tactics of how they will perform the measurement. I do not even discuss the "how" until I get to a future step.

How this plays out, is when the project team reaches the step where they work on improving the current process. For example, if I'm trying to help the project team see that an activity in the current process seems like bureaucracy and some team members push back, I can point back to the measurements of success and challenge them to describe how the activity in question helps deliver against the predefined measurements of success. So, this is just an example of how I continually go back to the *scope definition document*, throughout almost every step of a process improvement effort. It is your blueprint and it will keep you on track!

Bill: Susan, as I read your book I highlighted a number of things that I'd like to ask you to elaborate on. One statement that caught my attention was, "After you start thinking of business processes as the foundation to your business, you begin to see the power of having a process focus, and wonder why you waited so long to change your perspective." My experience is that most organizations probably don't necessarily think of process as a foundation for their business. Can you talk about why you see process as the foundation for a business?

Susan: I agree that many leaders of organizations generally do not think of process. Although I must say that when I watch television or listen to the news, I can't tell you how many times I hear the word "process" used. While people frequently use the word "process," leaders do not always step back and look at their end-to-end processes because everybody usually operates on a day-to-day basis in their own box.

I think though that once a leader starts thinking about process, they have a hard time going back to working in a silo. For example, I've done a lot of work in human resources. Once when I worked with a compensation team, it was not until they examined one of their end-to-end processes that the interdependency between their department and the recruitment department, for example, became obvious. Once leaders start to see the downstream impact of their work on the overall process, he or she develops a whole new appreciation for the process.

I think once you start to look at the entire process, leaders of those organizations see the connection and see the power of looking at the entire process and not just a specific department. That's something I've seen happen over and over again as functional boundaries dissolve.

When that happens, leaders want to do work on their other business processes. They then start looking at their business from a different perspective, a process perspective.

Bill: That's very interesting. I really like your comment about hearing process in the news. I've got to start listening for that now!

Susan: Oh my goodness. My husband continually points out when someone says, "Process!" It truly is unbelievable! Sometimes I'll do a blog on a new situation in which I heard the word "process" used. President Obama uses it all the time.

Bill: I'm probably going to hear it left and right now… no pun intended!

Susan: It's not always used in the best way either – sometimes it's used as an excuse or a filler word, which does bother me.

Bill: Exactly. Susan, another topic I would like to talk to you about is continuous improvement. I really liked what you described in the book, and the idea of a continuous improvement plan. There's a lot of discussion on how to perform continuous improvement, but this is the first time I've seen the notion of a continuous improvement plan in the way you express it. I think it's so simple, but it's brilliant.

Susan: It is simple. Everything in my book is intentionally simple. I had an interest in encouraging everyone to look at what they do every day and identify opportunities for improvement, so I wanted to make the topic approachable. I tried to make the book a common sense book with easy to understand terminology. As a result, I purposely avoided technical terminology in the book and any Lean Six Sigma, quality, or reengineering terms.

I think an example of this is continuous improvement as you mention. You hear this term all the time, but colleagues would ask me, "What does that really mean? How do you do it?" So, I tried to make that soft term [continuous improvement] more concrete by putting a plan and a schedule in place because I have seen some clients have difficulty sustaining the gains they made over time. I'm sure that you have seen organizations go back and fight some of the same battles all over again after a certain amount of time has passed since the improvement effort ended.

So the plan and schedule help organizations have the tools to keep them on track so that they continue to meet client and customer needs and stay competitive.

Bill: I think you've absolutely done that, Susan. Perhaps one of the biggest frustrations I hear from others that work in this field is the recurring pattern of making great progress and then it fades away. This is a great, simple, and elegant tool that can address this issue. Overall, I think you have really succeeded in making process improvement understandable and approachable in your book.

Susan: Thank you. If you look at the continuous improvement schedule, you may think, "Oh my gosh, keeping up with the schedule could consume a lot of time." But, if different people in an organization own their individual plan, it gives everybody a small section to own and it only requires an occasional review.

Bill: That's a great point. Susan, we are nearing the five minute mark, is there anything you would like to bring up in closing?

Susan: I just always think about the power of every employee. When you think of how many millions or billions of employees there are, and if each person came up with one improvement idea, just imagine, if you do the math—I think that's incredibly powerful.

On the other hand, if you lead a process improvement effort that has a dedicated team, senior leadership buy-in, and employees who know Lean Six Sigma, or some other technique, that's great. While it's optimal to have all these things, I believe it's the power of the individual who can make a difference.

Bill: Absolutely. It's interesting you mention that. In my last interview I conducted with John Bernard, he addresses that head-on, and he took it a step further in my mind, in that he said even in situations where we have organizations where employees are bringing ideas forward, typically they stop at management, and that's another barrier.

He talks about reengineering the process of managing the business, so people are empowered to make improvements and have the guidelines needed so that they can implement their ideas on their own.

Susan: Exactly. What reasonable manager is not going to want their employees to improve their business processes? If employees start small with a business process they have the right to change, momentum will build and they will establish credibility, but it does take some time.

My favorite quote comes from W. Edwards Deming— "If you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you are doing."

Bill: That's a great quote, Susan. Thank you for taking your time to talk with me today! You've shared some very interesting ideas. I'd encourage everyone who reads this interview to pick up your book for many more great ideas.

Susan Page – susan.page@cfl.rr.com

Susan Page works as a manager of HRIS for a large entertainment corporation in Orlando, FL, supporting several of the company's human resource systems. Prior to joining the entertainment corporation in 1997, she did business process consulting for five years both in New England and the Southeast.

Susan started focusing on improving business processes in the mid-1990s when there was a clash between the total quality management and reengineering camps. She led the effort to reengineer the learning and development process for a major computer company. As a result, she has stepped into countless situations when there is a lack of clarity, dysfunction among departments, unanticipated problems, or when a new opportunity presents itself. Sometimes her job description includes this work, but often it does not.

Susan holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Boston University, and a Master of Science in Computer Information Systems from the University of Phoenix. She is a graduate of the WOMEN Unlimited LEAD Program, and is a member of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the International Association for Human Resource Information Management (IHRIM).