ORION CONSTELLATION
volume 1 number 2 spring 2003

# How to Assess A Process: What Do You Ask?

You are part of a process improvement team and you have been asked to assess a process. What do you ask? This article gives you seven questions to ask right at the beginning, when data gathering data is most critical.

## Before You Ask Anything

Even before the first question has left your mouth, it is helpful to develop a framework for what you expect to learn. An hourglass provides an excellent visual representation for an effective framework.

Take a big picture approach first, drill down into the specific issues, and then go back to the big picture. Start with the organization's vision and mission, look at the tasks, identify the obstacles, develop solutions and return to the organization's vision and mission.

## Seven Answers You Want From Each Process Performer

To effectively assess a process involving multiple participants, you need to get answers from each person or group to the following seven questions:

1. What do you (or your area) do for the organization?
2. How does this job fit within the organization's other processes?
3. How do you know when this job is complete?
4. What facts or performance metrics exist?
5. What works well, what needs improvement, and/or what obstacles exist?
6. How effective are the systems/technology with which you interact?
7. What are some of your ideas for overcoming the obstacles?

## 1. What do you (or your area) do for the organization?

This is your probing question, where you learn how the process performer sees its role in the organization. This gives you two key pieces of information: first, you will get a better sense of how this area works in relationship to the rest of the organization; and second, you will see how the performer understands its impact on the end customer.

For example, when this question is posed to an accounts payable person in a construction firm, you might hear "We pay the company's bills so our suppliers will keep delivering the materials to the site so we can finish the customer's project on time." Consider yourself fortunate to get such an answer, as that person clearly understands the big picture and sees the link between the process and the end customer.

However, more often you might hear "We write the checks." Here you will need to probe further, following up with questions such as, "Why are you writing checks?" and "What happens to the checks?" and other big-picture questions. Your follow-up questions should not only help determine the importance of this area to the process, but also enhance the performers' personal understanding of how their area affects the customer.

*(continued on page 2).*

## Process Mapping Approach

*A series of articles about visually representing the way work flows*

The first article of this series, ***Facilitating A Discovery Session***, appeared in the first issue of the Orion Constellation, and served as a guide for to pick the right area, or process on which to focus. That article provides background to system mapping concepts and how-to tips on session facilitating. The second article, ***How to Assess A Process***, is intended to guide you in gathering information about how your chosen process is working, and provide guidelines for taking the first steps of process analysis, when gathering data is so critical. The third and final article, ***Mapping The Process***, is designed to help you select the right tools to visually represent your process, and provide guidelines for considering critical dimensions so that you can cre-ate clarity of how work is currently being done. This is scheduled to appear in the third issue of the *Orion Constellation*.

Taken together, these articles provide some solutions for focusing on the right process, with the right data using the right style of process maps.



ORION DEVELOPMENT GROUP
177 Beach 116th Street, Suite 4 • Rockaway Park, NY 11694
Phone (800) 510-2117 • Fax (718) 474-8210 • E-mail: info@odgroup.com • Web: www.odgroup.com

## How to Access a Process *(continued from front).*

### 2. How does this job fit within the organization's other processes?

This is really a three-part question:

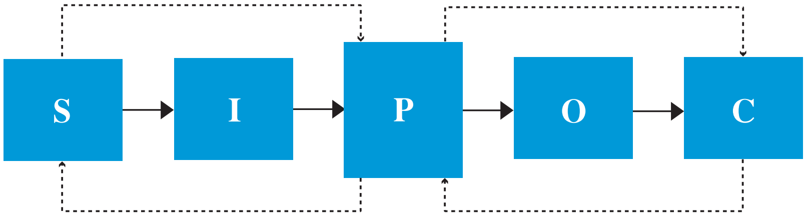
i. What has to happen before you can do your work and who is involved?
ii. How does your work happen?
iii. When your work is done, what happens next and who is involved?

These sub-questions provide the depth you need to explore the "systemic" perspective of the process. These questions use the "SIPOC" model (Supplier, Input, Process, Output, Customer). With it, you'll discover the Suppliers, their Inputs to the process, what is the Process, what Outputs does it create and the Customers. Narrowing the focus reveals how areas interact.

For example, our construction company accounts payable person might say, "The people at the site send me the invoice packages, which I enter into the computer. Then we print the checks and mail them to the vendors for any invoices due that week."

In this case, the SIPOC model follows:

S = Construction site personnel
I = Invoice packages
P = Accounts payable
O = Checks
C = Vendors




Answers to these three sub-questions may be very narrow or very broad. The level of detail you need will depend on a number of factors, such as how much time you have for the session and what type of diagnosis you will be doing. Remember, the purpose is to understand how areas are linked, not to test an individual's knowledge of the linkages. In other words, your goal is to determine the Suppliers and Customers so you know whom to interview next.

### 3. How do you know when this job is complete?

This is the thinnest part of the hourglass, the very narrow task-at-hand. Typically, performers know the answer, as this is where their lives are lived. While this may be the shortest question, the answer could take up the most time, and you will get the details here.

Look for common aspects: Who is doing the work? When do they do it (in what sequence)? Where is the work done (what office or with what system)? What work is done? What work is not done? To what degree is the work done (how much precision is done or is required)? How often is the work done?

For example, our accounts payable staff person might say, "George, who sits in the cube next to me, opens the mail every day and pulls out the A to L vendor invoices for me."

From that one sentence, we have learned who (George), when (prior to this staff person in sequence), where (nearby cube), what (opens mail), what is not done (he skips non-invoice mail), and what frequency (every day). That's a lot of key information you'll use to map the process.

A matrix like the following assists keeping track:

| Who | When | Where | What | Not | Degree | Often |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |

### 4. What facts or performance metrics exist?

This should be asked at the same time as the completion question. Look for specific measures (what is included in their performance report or as a monthly reporting to their manager) as well as unwritten expectations around measures.

You might need to ask specifics, such as, "how many invoices are received each day?" or "how many vendors exist" or "on average, how many invoices are paid with every check?" See if they have any sample monthly performance reports, as these may reveal other metrics about quality, service, speed and/or cost expectations.

For example, AP staffers often know the number of vendors and how many invoices they receive. Ask how the staff person is measured to reveal unwritten expectations. Is it based on number of checks cut week, or how quickly vendors make deliveries (linking back to what that person explained in question 1)?

*(continued on back page).*

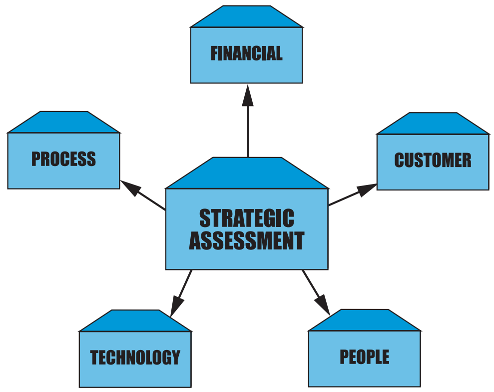
The *Orion Constellation* is published quarterly by the Orion Development Group

# Strategic Assessment: How Do We Achieve Our Mission?

Developing a vision and mission is the critical first step in strategic planning. Once you know where your organization is going, the next step is to determine how you are going to get there. The strategic assessment provides the building blocks for building the bridge between your current state and strategic vision.

## Conducting a Strategic Assessment

An organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs) will effect its vision realization. Strategic planning textbooks suggest five basic considerations be taken into account when describing the ideal future state of the organization: financial, customer, process, technology, and people. Naturally, these are also the building blocks to a successful assessment.




Financial Assessment involves balance sheet analysis and funding availability. This is obviously critical information when making a determination of how many initiatives can be supported and how aggressive they can be. Trend analysis using control charts should be performed on all key financial indicators.

Customer Assessments are more involved. The first step is to determine who you want your customers to be according to your vision. What characteristics does a good-quality customer have, and how do we attract and keep them? Only after this question is answered can the assessment proceed. There are numerous techniques available to assess customers and the marketplace.

People Assessments A skills inventory matching the proficiency of the employees to the skills needed for vision-critical functions can be extremely useful. Profiles of workforce demographics, review of the documentation of critical training and development processes, and employee surveys can also yield valuable information.

Technology Assessment The key issue when evaluating technology is to understand the goals of the IT department. If the main goal is to support the organization to make it successful, all is well. If the goal is to become a world-class IT department, you may have a disconnect that needs evaluation. Using the Orion system map to evaluate the interaction between IT and the organization can help determine the required level of IT service. In addition, interviews with key IT personnel, utilizing associations, periodicals, and the web to determine what is "best practice", and benchmarking other companies' technology can provide a good feel for SWOTs.

Process Assessments System-mapping key internal relationships (sales versus operations, R&D versus operations, R&D versus marketing, etc.) is an effective way to identify processes in need of strategic improvement. Creating cross-functional maps of these key processes is a great way to highlight inefficiencies that could have strategic impact. This is generally the least understood and most poorly executed phase of the assessment process.

It is also wise to conduct cross-functional focus groups to discover process-leveraging mechanisms involving process extension, market extension, and enterprise creation. Orion suggests separate sessions for each mechanism, rather than trying to identify opportunities in all three areas at once.

## Conclusions

There is no absolute blueprint or timeline for a strategic assessment, as each should be tailored to the particular organization. The tools and techniques described above may be combined in any number of ways to identify key strategic issues, and the time investment will vary by organizational size, analysis depth, geographic spread of the customers and employees, and other factors.

What is absolute, however, is that once the SWOTs with strategic significance are identified a strategic plan is ready to be developed. The techniques for an effective process-oriented plan development will be the subject of part three of our series, appearing in the next issue of the *Orion Constellation.*

## How to Access a Process? *(continued from page 2).*

### 5. What works well, what needs improvement, and/or what obstacles exist?

This series of questions lets the process performer self-evaluate. Allow them to share with you the enhancements they have already made, and honor their work to date. Use jargon that works in your organization to determine the obstacles, or try alternatives such as “what prevents you from being effective” or “why do things take extra effort on your part.”

An AP clerk might reveal that while he is measured on the number of checks written, his manager also tracks the number of upset vendor calls. That manager also receives feedback from the site about shipment delays. This staff person might divulge that since he knows about the vendor calls, he personally checks with each vendor to ensure against late shipments. This “extra” work is worth documenting and indicates a measurement system that if made explicit, could simplify the entire workflow.

### 6. How effective are the systems/technology with which you interact?

The answers here will reveal how the information systems enable or impinge the process. Ask for concrete names of these systems, and the nicknames or jargon they use. These names become useful for gaining credibility later.

Listen for words like, “…I re-key the report…” or “…I download the file to reconcile … “. How the process performers interact with systems is critical to gathering process data because systems are a big part of how work gets done. While it may seem like a small part of this person’s job, large and integrated systems often touch many parts of an organization, and you have just uncovered one small piece of a bigger puzzle.

### 7. What are some of your ideas for overcoming the obstacles?

Here you can pull back to the big picture and take in all that has been discussed. Allow the process performers to dream a little and consider the “ideal world.” Those who do the work often have excellent ideas for improvement; they just may not have had an audience before. Allowing them to share how they would “fix” the problem may provide some excellent ideas.

In the Accounts Payable example, the staff person might say, “If the crews could enter the invoice information at the site, we’d have early warning about upcoming cash requirements and could plan our check runs accordingly.” It is not unusual for it to be “someone else’s” problem at this point, but perhaps they have an effective idea around single point of entry.

By now you have gained insight into what to ask when assessing a process. Remember to begin with an “hourglass” in mind. Take a big picture approach first, then drill right down into the specific issue, and then go back to the big picture.

With the seven questions in your toolkit, you’ll be ready to assess any process.

## In the next issue of the *Orion Constellation…*

- Process Mapping Approach — Part III: Mapping the Process
- Linking Processes and Strategy — The Strategic Planning Process

**Here Is Your Newsletter**

**inside…**

- How to Access a Process What Do You Ask?
- Strategic Assessment: How Do We Achieve Our Mission?

ORION DEVELOPMENT GROUP
177 Beach 116th Street, Suite 4
Rockaway Park, NY 11694