

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

UNDERSTAND THE PROPERTIES AND ATTRIBUTES OF A PROCESS

A process is not just a list of activities. It can be identified or characterised in a number of different ways - for example, by the event which initiates it, by how you name it or by the value it adds to what is “processed”. All these elements may be relevant to a degree for any process. Although there may be a desire to get the activities down on paper or the flowchart sketched out as quickly as possible, you will benefit from taking a moment or two to think how the following properties and attributes can be defined for the process in question. It will help you to understand the process better as well as prompting you to assess whether it is achieving what it sets out to do.

DEFINE THE AIMS AND BOUNDARIES OF THE PROCESS

Even the way you name a process needs some thought - if you have adopted the top down approach, each step in the higher level process will be an action. So "verb / noun" may be the best way to define the process. An alternative is to use nouns for the name of the process and for the key steps, and only use active verbs when you get to the detailed level in a flowchart. Thus a process might be entitled "Purchasing and Receipt of Stock", and one of its tasks might be "Raise a purchase order". But whatever you do, be consistent!

What is the process designed to achieve? The objective(s) of the process may seem obvious, but it is likely that some of the higher level objectives of the business also need to be considered. So, satisfying a need for material is the obvious aim, but there may also be underlying objectives to minimise stockholding or to develop a closer relationship with certain key suppliers. And a supporting process such as this should always be designed to help meet the objective of the production process.

Which area(s) of your operation does the process cover? Defining the scope of a process spells out the extent of its application - for example, it may be restricted to a specific project or to a product group. As an aside, the reputation of ISO9000:1994 suffered when organisations were certified against the standard for only a limited element of their operations, but they happily promoted their registration as though it applied company-wide. The reputation of the organisations who did this also suffered in the eyes of those who were not taken in! Fortunately, the revised version of the standard is much stricter about what can be omitted from the scope of registration.

The "ownership" of the process is also important - both if something goes wrong and if improvements need to be made. At the end of the day, who is accountable? Who "takes a bow" if it works or "takes a bough" (to the culprits) if it doesn't? Oh dear, that smacks of the old "management by fear" approach - and I thought that we were in the process of overcoming all of that!