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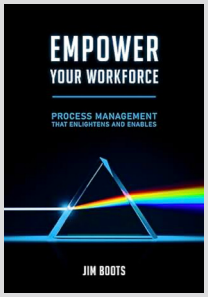

Empower Your Workforce: Process Management that Enlightens and Enables

Jim Boots
2024. 85 pages.
Amazon Kindle $9.99. Paper $14.99.
Reviewed by Paul Harmon.

A few years ago, when I was more active in on-site BPM consulting, I kept wishing for a good book for managers. I'm not talking about a book about how to do process work — if I was concerned with that, I'd happily recommend my own book on *Business Process Change*. But *Business Process Change* is a technical book, filled with information on how to use scope and flow diagrams and how to organize a team to undertake a major business process effort. Moreover, its almost 400 pages long. I'm talking about a much shorter book that doesn't so much teach process analysis and design as to tell a manager how to use some key process ideas to do his or her job better. Management is a complex set of skills: It requires someone to hire and fire employees, to monitor their work on a day by day basis, rewarding the good efforts and correcting the not quite so good. It requires setting goals, developing budgets, tracking costs, and dealing with complaints from peers and from senior executives. And it requires planning how the work is to be done and monitoring the quality of the output.

Obviously there are levels of managers with different emphasis at different levels. Supervisors need to be able to do the work. Middle managers need to coordinate a group of employees, or to monitor a set of activities. Senior managers need to focus on strategy, on the business the company is in, or ought to be in, and how to finance things. Each management level could easily use its own book, but my focus was on middle managers. It my experience they are heading departments and trying to assure the work gets done. They have many jobs, but among others, they are responsible for defining, or at least approving how the work gets done. More important, they are responsible for improving how the work gets done. The middle managers are the key to assuring that the organization constantly improves its productivity and stays competitive. In other words, the middle manager has a real interest in processes and in improving processes.

In too many organizations, process work has been somehow delegated to a group in IT, and has become a synonym for planning what new software to buy and install. But from long experience, I

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know that good process work doesn't depend on IT but on the people who actually manage the work on a day by day basis. Bad management, leading to poor employee performance, can easily sabotage the best designed automation plans. If you want to create an organization with superior performance and high productivity, you need to have good middle managers who know and care about their organizations business processes.

The reality is that, too often, middle managers don't care enough about processes. They worry about employee performance, and try to keep peers and senior executives happy, submit their budgets on time, and worry about defective products, but they do it in crisis mode, changing from one focus to another without an good overview of how it all fits together. In essence, they are not taking a process approach; they are breaking their job's into tasks and simply move from one task to another, depending on what seems to demand attention the most.

I've met a lot of managers who are task oriented and wished I had a book to recommend to help them shift to a more integrated, process oriented approach. Again, keep in mind that I'm not talking about turning these guys into process analysts, or new process developers. I just want to get them thinking about their day-to-day work in a broader, more connected way.

Jim Boots is someone who apparently has similar concerns. I know Jim. I consulted with him when he heading a department at Chevron in Oakland, and even then he was focused on a different approach to process work.

Most companies into process, for example, use a process modeling software tool that can handle all the complexity that one encounters in a major business process that has complex interfaces, dozens of employees and layers of supporting software. Jim used a simple process modeling tool that could be used to model the steps in a reasonably simple task. He used the software to develop models of tasks to be performed and then gave the model to the employee who had to do the work. In effect, the software became a job aid and a way for the business manager to communicate with the employee. Any manager who used such a tool was necessarily focusing on what their employees were doing, and on how to simplify and streamline the steps in the task. The details aren't important here: What's important was that Jim was thinking not about major process resigns, or software automation. He was focused on facilitating a clear overview of the work being done and on how the manager and the employees involved to talk about the work, the steps, the timing, and all those details that a manager must concern him or herself with if he or she really wants to improve the productivity of a work group.

Now, years later, I encounter Jim Boots again and find that he's written a book for managers, urging them to use a process management approach to do their jobs. I say a book — it's 85 pages long and has rather large type: it's not so much a book as a pamphlet. Which is good, because managers are business people and not likely to read 200 pages if they can avoid it.

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Empower Your Workforce is divided into nine short chapters and several appendices. In essence, it starts by discussing what the process approach is all about, lays out a good overview a small organization, and shows how it can be conceptualized as a set of processes. It argues, as I have, that one of the key roles of every manager is to understand the process he or she manages, and to work to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of said process.

Jim goes on to consider how you might model a department and how you can model a specific workflow, constantly returning to the basic themes of process: setting goals, defining procedures that work, and defining the work specific employees are responsible for achieving. Along the way key concepts are clearly marked, and tasks the manager must monitor and support are emphasized. We are looking at two things simultaneously here, defining what employees should do, and defining what a manager should do to assure that employees do what they are supposed to do. Appendices summarize and offer extended suggestions. I enjoyed noting that Jim got ChatGPT into the act by asking its advice and reproducing its response.

Writing a good book for a manager is a challenge. As I suggested, most managers already have too much to do, and you are asking them to stop and try to re-conceptualize their job and to think about differently. It's a hard sell, but I suspect that *Empower Your Workforce* might be just the book some managers need. It's not too complex or detailed. It's written by a guy who has been there and done that and is sharing practical advice. And, it's good advice. If I encountered a manager who needed advice on how to do his or her job better, I'd recommend it.

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