Using Rational Process with Others

Introduction

Perhaps the most challenging use of the rational processes is applying them in a group or team setting. While it's true that involving other people in a rational process application may increase your chances for a successful outcome, it's also true that these same people can sometimes hinder your rational approach.

This topic, "Using Rational Process with Others," describes how best to integrate other people's knowledge and skills into your rational process application, and, just as important, how to overcome the obstacles that involving these people may present.

Involving the Right People

Involving the "right" people in a rational process application can provide you with access to key information about the topic you're working on. For example, if you're confronted with a machine that has a deviation that no one has been able to solve, you might want to include the following people in your Problem Analysis: operators who run the machine, the vendor who sold you the machine, your maintenance people that have fixed the machine in the past, and anyone who has tried to solve the problem already.

People who should be involved in a rational process application are often referred to as "stakeholders" in the concern you're working on. They include those:

- Who will be impacted by the outcome

- Who have relevant knowledge or information about the topic

- Whose commitment must be gained to successfully implement the resolution

The power of using a rational process is that it allows everyone involved to see the logic of the method used. Involving stakeholders will let them witness the process and contribute to it, and give you the best opportunity to gain their support and commitment to the outcome—even if they do not agree totally with the resolution.

Involving People Electronically

However, not all rational process applications require face-to-face collaboration to gain the commitment of—and capture information from—stakeholders. You can use the electronic worksheets you were provided during the workskhop in your virtual meetings or electronic communications to allow you to collect important information and opinions on your application. For example:

- You're conducting a Decision Analysis, and you want to make sure you have considered all possible alternatives. You send an e-mail to three people with expertise in the decision area, giving them the list of alternatives and asking them to add to it, if possible.

- You're conducting a Situation Appraisal on "concerns with operating costs" with three power plants, and you can't get everyone together for a face-to-face meeting. You send a list of your concerns to the managers of the three plants for them to make additions. After getting the list back, you arrange for a conference call to separate and clarify some of the key concerns.

However, there may be instances where meeting to work on a rational process application is the best way to proceed. In these cases, you may project the worksheets onto a larger screen so that everyone can view the process application while it's completed.

Common Obstacles When Involving People

People who join your rational process application may bring to the process one or more of the following obstacles:

- The inability to communicate openly due to bias and unspoken motivations

- The inability to work around feelings and emotions that might influence their ability to manage or get along with others

- The tendency to jump to conclusions about other people, the cause of a problem, or the best alternative for a decision

- The desire to assume responsibility for issues that lie beyond their skills and/or training

- The use of broad descriptions of concerns or labels rather than specific, pinpointed descriptions (Descriptions such as "morale problem" and "communication difficulties" provide a wide category to describe a concern, but they hinder people's ability to resolve the concern.)

- The tendency to present rumor and opinion as fact

- A lack of familiarity or comfort with the rational processes

How to Overcome the Obstacles

Sometimes, the step-by-step, rational processes alone will force people to set aside their biases, unfounded conclusions, and emotions. But if these obstacles are regularly made part of your group's applications, here are several methods you can use to overcome them:

- Use the questions to keep the group "on process." If people begin to discuss content that's related to another step in process (such as jumping to an alternative), let them know that what they are saying is valuable, but not relevant to the current step. Recording this information and promising to revisit it at the appropriate time will relieve the group's need to capture it, while allowing you to stay focused on the step at hand.

- Test the information that is offered as "fact." Questions such as "How do you know that?" or "What is the source of this information?" or "What evidence do you have?" will test the validity of the information. These questions will also help reveal assumptions.

- Use proper questioning and listening skills to gather the correct, specific, and relevant information from others (see Questioning and Listening Skills). Sometimes, using "proper" questioning means phrasing your questions so that everyone, regardless of their rational process experience, understands what you're asking.

A Word About Conflict

Even the best rational process applications may result in conflict. This is not necessarily destructive to your application. In fact, if managed effectively, conflict can bring important issues to light and facilitate the search for constructive solutions. Focusing the debate on facts associated with a specific issue-rather than the emotions involved-will help you funnel the emotion into constructive work on the issue. In addition, being clear about expectations and the commitment you require will also help avoid conflict.

Emotional conflict

If emotions are present but not brought to the surface, it's extremely important that you get them out into the open so they can be addressed. Here are some methods for doing that:

- Ventilate the emotions. You relieve inner pressure when you bring feelings into the open. This can be done by:

  - Using unstructured statements like "Something seems to be bothering you..."

  - Reflecting people's feelings by repeating their own statements back to them. For example, "You believe that..." or "You feel that..." This sympathetic technique helps people to express their feelings more fully.

- Don't interrupt pauses. They allow for expression of emotions.

- Avoid answering an emotionally loaded question. Usually these questions are not asked to gather information but are part of an emotional expression. Respond by reflecting on the feelings implied in the question, or by asking a question in return.

- Identify the source of the emotions. Emotions can come from different places. Some arise from the discussion at hand. Others come from outside issues. Knowing the origin is the secret. If the dispute is outside the discussion's scope, it may be so identified and set aside for resolution later on. But if the issue relates directly to the immediate discussion, then the feelings must be resolved.

Appraising a Situation in Teams

The concepts of Situation Appraisal lend themselves to a team-based approach. Involving others from the start is critical, and face-to-face meetings are usually preferred.

Most likely pitfalls for a team	How to handle the pitfalls
The team doesn't include the right people.	Involve others if: You recognize that some information is missing from the concern. You do not know what information is needed or how to get it. The resolution to the concern will not be implemented without the commitment of others and others will not commit without being involved. You expect conflict about the resolution of the concern.
The team gets stuck over-analyzing one concern in a Situation Appraisal.	Maintain focus on appraising the situation. By definition, Situation Appraisal is not an analysis; it's an appraisal. Many times, groups believe that they are separating and clarifying an issue, when really they are beginning to analyze it. For example, instead of simply writing "Solve paint chip problem on Line 4," the team will begin to write things like "Can't get the correct specification data for Line 4 problem" and "We think it's the wash tanks causing the Line 4 problem" and "Paint chip problem has reached 1,000 rejects." Some of this information will come up in the Problem Analysis. Some of it, like the last one, is information that will be used later in the Situation Appraisal when you set priority on the issues.

Making Decisions in Teams

Decision making is almost never done in a vacuum. In most cases, making, approving, and implementing the decision will require the input of others. The inherently logical approach of Decision Analysis makes it an excellent tool to manage conflict and debate associated with a decision.

Most likely pitfalls for a team	How to handle the pitfalls
The team is not sure about the true purpose for making the decision.	Obtain agreement on a Decision Statement. This will often help focus the team. Sometimes, this step is the most challenging aspect of a Decision Analysis. However, once this is accomplished, the team is often able to move forward more quickly than before.
One or more members of the team are trying to influence the process so that their chosen alternative is selected.	Establish and then weigh objectives for the decision. Since disagreements often arise from a focus on alternatives, dealing first with the objectives helps clarify your direction and allows for input from various interests. Weighing objectives should be done in a conversational format. Questions such as "Why does this objective deserve a weight of 7?" can reveal background information and thought processes of various members of the team. Weighing objectives can also reveal where the team is in conflict, and where they agree.
There isn't enough involvement from those who will be impacted by the decision.	Gather input from various sources before making a decision. Forcing an alternative on people is usually a good way to stall implementation and scare off support. Decision Analysis provides several areas where input can be gathered, including generating and weighing objectives, generating and evaluating alternatives, and assessing risks and adverse consequences.
Some members of the team offer lukewarm (or no) participation.	Encourage participation from all members of the team. Instead of asking for input verbally, there are other ways to encourage participation from all members of the team. Asking the team to record their concerns, objectives, or alternatives prior to a meeting will ensure that everyone receives a voice in the process. In addition, singling out quiet people for their opinion will give them the opportunity to participate.

Using Potential Problem Analysis in Teams

Whenever organizational changes are made, misunderstanding and confusion follow. Even the smallest change in policies or procedures can severely impact the ability of employees to do their jobs. Potential Problem Analysis provides a logical basis to collect and organize all things that could go wrong as a result of a change; be it a new project, product,

the implementation of a decision, or the resolution of a concern. It also allows you to gather input from people who will be impacted by the action that will occur. Resistance to change can be managed if people are allowed to describe potential problems and offer suggestions for preventing and handling future difficulties.

Most likely pitfalls for a team	How to handle the pitfalls
The team focuses on just one area of a project or action.	Analyze your entire project, not just one area. Protecting the most crucial area of a project or action is a good start to a Potential Problem Analysis, but it should not always end there. Often, there is more than one critical task that you'll need to analyze. If completing the entire analysis yourself will take too much time, assign critical actions in the plan to others who will be responsible for implementing them. Ask them to return a Potential Problem Analysis to you, along with a recommendation for implementing preventive actions and contingent actions.
The team lives in the present instead of imagining what could go wrong in the future.	Schedule time for a Potential Problem Analysis meeting, involving people who will work with you on the project. People who have a history of living in the present and "fighting fires" as they arise should be included in the meeting (be it real or virtual), or be assigned to complete a Potential Problem Analysis on their own.

Using Potential Opportunity Analysis in Teams

People have the tendency, especially in teams, to focus on what could go wrong with a given situation, project, or action. Although this is a critical part of the success of your plan, so too is thinking about what might go better than expected as a result of the plan.

Most likely pitfalls for a team	How to handle the pitfalls
The team doesn't use Potential Opportunity Analysis enough.	Work Potential Opportunity Analysis into your regular process analyses. If you schedule a Potential Problem Analysis meeting, reserve time at the end for a Potential Opportunity Analysis meeting. If you assign a critical task or piece of a project plan to someone to conduct a Potential Problem Analysis, also ask for a Potential Opportunity Analysis.
The team limits the amount of time for brainstorming about opportunities.	Keep a focus on the positive. While it's crucial for a team to protect against what could go wrong, creating an environment that encourages thinking about potential opportunities can result in big payoffs. One way to do this is to reserve brainstorming time for potential opportunities.

Summary

There's no way to avoid it. If you want to successfully complete and implement a rational process, chances are you'll need to involve other people. People bring additional knowledge, expertise, approval power, and perspectives to resolving your concerns. But they also pose many pitfalls that can threaten your work—from conflict to confused expectations. "Using Rational Process with Others" outlines some of the most common pitfalls to involving others in each rational process, and gives you tips on how to avoid them.