Looking in The Mirror: Part 1

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As the saying goes, "If you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there." This kind of problem is what many IT organizations face in the beginning of a Continuous Service Improvement Program (CSIP).

"We want to improve service using the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL®) but don't know 'where to start.' What are the things we need to think about; know about and most importantly do something about?" We hear this question a lot in the ITIL world, and the only way to answer this question is a process maturity assessment.

You can hire consultants, or learn to do it yourself. An experienced consultant can provide an objective assessment of capability and maturity. Doing it yourself is cheaper, but without adequate experience and training the results might not be accurate.

This is the first in a series of articles on how to perform process assessments. Following is an overview of how to perform an assessment of the Service Desk Function and Incident Management process.

All assessments are based on 3 things:

- An in depth understanding of the process
- A standard to compare the observed process
- Experience, skills and judgment of the assessor

The following is an introduction to performing an assessment that touches on all the important concepts. Bearing in mind that this is a high-level assessment, it should give the reader a better idea of the necessary scope of an in-depth assessment.

Process Introduction

The Service Desk is an important functional area in the management of IT Services. The questions; Are your customers satisfied with how your Service Desk performs? Why is that important anyway? How does the Service Desk function fit into the overall picture of IT Service Management, goes to the very heart of the matter?

The objective of the Service Desk is to provide a single point of contact for the customer, and to facilitate the restoration of IT services with minimal impact on the business and within agreed the service levels, through the Incident Management process.

Often, the lines become blurred between the Service Desk function, Incident Management process and other technical functional areas. A key to understanding Incident Management is the realization that the Incident Management process by itself does not affect the repair of any failed component within the IT infrastructure. Its purpose is to coordinate that effort through other functional areas within the IT organization.

Successful IT organizations understand the function of the Service Desk, and the key role that the Incident Management

process plays in improving the overall availability of IT Services and the efficiency of both the business users and the IT organizations own staff.

Process Orientation

First and foremost the Service Desk acts as a single point of contact between the IT Service Provider and the end user of IT Services. This is a critical activity because it acts as a control point for all communications between IT and the business user.

The Service Desk is concerned with the Incident Management process. It has responsibility for key components of the incident control activity (also know as the incident life cycle). It ensures the coordination of the rapid restoration of failed IT services.

The Incident Management Process: When we look at the activities associated with Incident Management, we're looking at the stepwise progression necessary to restore IT services, as well as ongoing activities necessary to manage the Incident Management process.

Incident Management involves the initial detection of the incident and recording of the event itself, followed by the initial provision of support to the end user and subsequent classification of the incident. The incident is then investigated and the failure diagnosed, followed by the resolution and restoration of the IT service.

The Incident Management process is also responsible for ensuring, where possible, that a work around is developed. A work around will restore the service, but does not necessarily represent final resolution of the incident. It should be noted that other functional areas within the IT provider organization most often accomplish the actual development of a work around.

Restoration of the IT Service is not the end of the incident control activity. The final step is the closure of the incident itself. This entails a detailed review of the incident, the steps taken to restore the IT Service, and refinement of the data necessary to close the incident.

On an ongoing basis, Incident Management process "owns" the incident life cycle. It is responsible for the monitoring of the incident, tracking of the incident and the activities of those involved in incident resolution, and the communication of the status of the incident to the end user.

The Service Desk is the primary conduit for communications with the end users of IT Services, and in its expanded role, the Service Desk also has the responsibility to provide business process support.

Benefits

When successfully implemented the Service Desk brings several significant benefits to both the IT organization and the end user of IT Services. Foremost among these is the Service Desk's ability to help maximize IT Service availability. As the single point of contact, the Service Desk eliminates any confusion that exists about who to call or how to contact them. It also provides a significantly improved level of communication with the end user. The Service Desk also leads to the significant improvement in both user and IT resource utilization.

Through the Incident Management process the IT organization can maximize IT Service availability, reduce the impact of incidents on the business, improve overall communications with the end user and the level of objectivity applied, all the while improving resource utilization in both the user and IT organizations.

The Incident Management process is also the ideal source for failure data that can be used to produce meaningful quality reports on service and Service Levels. Overall the successful implementation of the Incident Management process will lead to the lowering of IT support costs and, perhaps most important of all, improved customer satisfaction.

All these benefits lead to an overall lower cost to support IT services. A successful Service Desk implementation should,

therefore, measurably improve user satisfaction with the quality of services supplied.

High Level Assessment Questions

Question 1: Have you established a formal Service Desk function within your IT organization?

Question 2: Do you have a mechanism or methods by which the incidents or calls are identified and tracked?

Question 3: Have you defined the quality aspects that are applied to the capture and recording of incidents or calls?

Question 4: Have you identified specific goals or metrics from which you measure the effectiveness of the Incident Management process?

Question 5: Do you have a procedure for monitoring the progress of incidents?

Question 6: Does the IT organization have a clearly defined and agreed definition of the scope of the Incident Management process?

Question 7: Do you have a procedure in place that defines the quality aspects of the Incident Management process?

Question 8: Do you do a formal review of whether targets and objectives for the Incident Management process are being met?

Question 9: Does your organization provide management reports on...

    Incident analysis?
    Operational performance of the Incident Management process?
    Incident handling efficiency?
    Details of any anomalies in the configuration of the IT infrastructure?
    Trend analysis in incident occurrences and resolution?

Question 10: Does the Service Desk staff hold regular meetings with other staff members interested in...

    Problem Management
    Configuration Management
    Change Management
    Service Level Management
    Assessment Evaluation

All questions listed must be answered **YES** or **TRUE** to attain a maturity level. All previous levels must be achieved first.

Initial: Questions 1 & 2
At this level usually no formal Service Desk function exists, and the activities of the Incident Management process are ad hoc. Any success an IT organization may have at this level is primarily due to the heroic individual efforts of IT staff members.

Symptoms that an organization at this level of process maturity might encounter are:

- Pervasive levels of dissatisfaction within the end user community with the availability of help, and the quality of the help they get.
- Confusion among users as to whom to contact when problems arise.
- Constant interruption of technical staff to resolve mundane problems.
- Low productivity of technical staff, blown project deadlines.

- Low level of job satisfaction among highly skilled technical staff.

Fundamental to moving out of this level is:

- Establish a formal Service or Help Desk function.
- Capture (record) all incidents or calls for help.
- Uniquely identify each incident or call.

Repeatable: 3 & 4
At this level most IT organizations have established a Service or Help Desk function. Some policies may have been developed to provide guidance for the Incident Management process. Heroism still plays a significant part in meeting the end user's expectations.

Symptoms that an organization at this level of process maturity might encounter are:

- End users have a place to call, but may not know it, or have not developed any level of trust that the Service Desk staff can help them.
- If the end users can find the Service Desk, most of the time the problem is resolved.
- End users bypass the Service Desk and go directly to the IT technical staff.
- Many incidents require multiple calls to the Service Desk before they are resolved.
- Some open incidents never go away.

Fundamental to moving out of this level is:

- Establish the scope of an Incident
- Develop procedures for
  - Monitoring the progress of incidents
  - Incident closure
  - Incident status
- Inform end users of incident status and pending changes

Defined: 5 & 6
At this level the Service or Help Desk function is well established, and is responsible for the Incident Management process. The Incident Management process is defined, and under control most of the time. There are notable exceptions where the process breaks down. This instability causes the users to remain ambivalent about using the Service Desk.

Symptoms that an organization at this level of process maturity might encounter are:

- Routine incidents are handled in a normal fashion.
- Incidents with high business impact and urgency tend to cause the Incident Management process to "melt down.
- Call and incident volumes are up, and customer satisfaction unchanged.
- Some noticeable improvement in IT organization efficiencies.

Fundamental to moving out of this level is:

- Improved "marketing" of the Service Desk to the end users.
- Improved communication with users via meaningful standard reports.
- Defined quality criteria for the capture of incidents, and incident data.
- Formal staff training in the Incident Management process.
- Formal review of Incident Management targets and objectives.
- Service Desk tool that supports and enables the Incident Management process.

Managed: 7 & 8

At this level the Service or Help Desk function is very well established. The Incident Management process is stable, and is monitored and measured to ensure that the process is quantitatively understood and controlled. The majority of the end users are satisfied with the level of service they receive from the Service Desk.

Symptoms that an organization at this level of process maturity might encounter are:

- Call volumes are up, as well as end user satisfaction.
- The Service Desk is the first and only place where end users now go for help.
- The Service Desk provides quality failure data to other ITSM processes.
- High level of job satisfaction among Service Desk staff
- Measurably higher levels of productivity among the IT technical staff.
- More projects delivered on time.

Fundamental in moving out of this level is:

- Quantitative reporting
- Incident analysis
- Operational performance
- Call handling
- Configuration anomalies
- Trend analysis

Optimized: 9 & 10

At this level the Service Desk is viewed as a critical IT function, and the Incident Management process is fully matured, and integrated with other IT Service Management processes. The IT organization actively promotes a culture of service excellence, and rewards its staff members accordingly. User satisfaction is consistently high.

Symptoms that an organization at this level of process maturity might encounter are:

- Service Desk management holds regular meetings with parties interested in:
  - Problem Management
  - Configuration Management
  - Change Management
  - Service Level Management
- Service Desk checks with business customers to ensure the activities performed by the Incident Management process adequately support their business needs.
- Periodically survey end users to ensure customer satisfaction.
- Actively monitor trends in customer satisfaction.
- Use customer feedback in improving the Service Desk function and the Incident Management process.
- Constantly monitor the business customer's perception of the value of the Service Desk and the Incident Management process.

Summary

The only sure way for an IT organization to know where it's at, relative to ITIL best practice framework is to "look in the mirror." In other words; do an assessment of its current process maturity/capability. Learning how to perform your own assessment is a critical IT management skill, when mastered, you will find it an invaluable tool for improving your organization.