

# Why is Standardization so Elusive?



Standardization is an important concept in lean methodology. It is the concept that everyone who processes the same thing should do it in the same best way. This helps to reduce variability in quality and process time. This is especially important in an operating environment where variability is frowned upon. As such, many organizations come up with numerous tools such as process maps, step maps, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and other such documents to outline how something should be done. Furthermore, some come up with standardized templates that employees should use during the process. Up until this point, organizations seem to be doing all the right things to ensure process standardization.

So, why is it that the following things are so commonly observed?

- Average call handling time varies by more than 100% between customer service representatives in the same call center.
- Average number of steps for one employee to complete a process is 10 while it is 6 for another employee on the same team.
- One officer takes 10 minutes to follow up with a vendor while another takes 30 minutes to follow up with the same vendor.

The large variance observed can be attributed to the lack of standardization in the way that employees execute the process. But, aren't there tools and templates in place to prevent the variation? Well, yes. However, organizations face several challenges, which prevent the usefulness of these tools and templates.

**Here are the top 4 challenges that you should be aware of:**

### 1. DOCUMENTS ARE NOT KEPT UP-TO-DATE.

Pick an SOP and check the date that it was last reviewed and updated. It would not be surprising at all if that date was more than a year old. A lot of times, organizations create SOPs, but fail to keep them updated. Over time, team members begin to change the way they process based on their own experience. Sometimes, they find shortcuts, or deem a certain step unnecessary. None of these deviations are documented, none of them known to anyone else. When new members join, their method of processing is dictated by their trainer. As a result, the SOP becomes obsolete and standardization no longer exists in the team.

### 2. DOCUMENTS ARE HARD TO FIND.

It is difficult to find documents in large organizations. There is no standard naming convention, and there are just too many documents with similar names. Search engines bring out numerous irrelevant results. In order for the standard documents to be useful, managers must ensure that they are housed in a place where it is easily accessible by employees who need them. When a document is hard to locate, employees get impatient and will not spend the time to look for it. They will find other ways to get the information that they need and there is no guarantee that they will receive the correct information. When employees receive different information, they are bound to draw different conclusions, which will lead to deviation from the standard.

# Active Management is Key

### 3. DOCUMENTS ARE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.

Tools and templates should not be difficult to understand and use. People have a tendency to want to use fancy words or attempt to sound more sophisticated when creating these tools. Don't- these documents should use the simplest language and explanations as possible. They are meant to provide clear and concise instructions to its audience. Fancy language is not required and could potentially confuse the audience. Additionally, there is no need to write everything out. Sometimes, using pictures and screenshots are a lot more effective. If employees do not understand the tools and templates, they will not use it. Or, they will interpret things differently and use it in a way that it was unintended for. All of this will cause them to deviate from the standard.

### 4. DOCUMENTS ARE VAGUE.

Whether it is tools or templates everyone can interpret the same thing differently. This is why it is important to ensure that proper training is provided whenever a new tool or template is rolled out. Regardless of how intuitive it may seem, there needs to be some sort of training to ensure that everyone is on the same page. The problem with no training is that everyone could believe that they are doing the right thing, when in fact; they are all doing the "right" thing differently. This creates a particularly dangerous situation because no one has any visibility into what is really going on. Furthermore, no one will have any visibility into the issue until something goes wrong. As such, it is extremely important to ensure that training is provided to everyone who is involved with the process. Otherwise, deviation from standard could occur as soon as the tools and templates are rolled out.

### How to Overcome These Challenges

Tools and templates alone cannot ensure process standardization. It is up to managers to ensure that these are reviewed, updated, accessible, easily understandable, and that employees are properly trained. One simple way to ensure that these necessary steps are taken is through active management, whereby managers actively:

- communicate expectations,
- monitor progress, and
- follow up on results.

When managers do this, they can be assured that everyone on their team is processing in the same best way.

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