

Approach Reviews

by Fred Engel
Westerly Consulting, LLC

Introduction

Timely decision making that sticks is the hallmark of good companies. Good review processes help in assuring that good decisions are being made throughout the organization. One of the main inhibitors to good review and decision making is the tendency people have of wanting to have their work reviewed once they have polished it sufficiently to warrant public airing and review. Unfortunately, this natural tendency runs counter to the dynamics that would make for good decision making. Reviews of decisions need to be iterative, happening early and often. This document describes an iterative review process we call the Approach Review.

The Approach Review starts the process of having the direction reviewed much earlier than is comfortable for most teams. Forced early review causes others to enter the process before people are vested in the solution and before the details swamp people's ability to understand what is being decided. It relies heavily on the fact that in most situations, people make the basic directional decision early and then spend much of the remaining time figuring out how to sell that decision and avoid being criticized. In the Approach Review process the direction takes center stage and the people are there to help assure that the direction being chosen is the best decision the team can possibly make.

The largest resistance to adopting the Approach Review is the discomfort with early review. People naturally do not want to be reviewed before they are "fully prepared". They do not want to send out a document that is a bare sketch of some ideas without having the confidence that those ideas will carry the day. We all want to look good in front of others and get credit for doing good work. The Approach Review seems to fly in the face of these drives by causing people to admit in public what they know and do not know and to get others to help fill out the work under review.

Forced early review is the cheapest fastest way to get people in sync and to get effective review. Avoiding being criticized most teams spend a great deal of time writing specifications which are really giant defensive documents aimed at covering every aspect of anticipated criticism. The longer a team avoids being reviewed and the more they have filled out their solution the harder it is to change anything substantive because the team is now entrenched. Very early review can fend off this situation and allow change to occur when people have not yet become entrenched in their positions and thus are more open to input that moves things in a different direction.

Peter Drucker, in "The Effective Decision" lays out the following steps in decision making:

1. Classifying the problem
2. Defining the problem
3. Specifying the answer to the problem
4. Deciding what is "right", rather than what is acceptable...
5. Building into the decision the action to carry it out.
6. Testing the validity and effectiveness of the decision against the actual course of events

Approach Reviews (cont.)

Unfortunately, people are not often enlightened with this methodology choosing instead to get lost in a more emotional path for arriving at the decisions. Many people lack the discipline and interpersonal skills to use his methodology. They are left to their intuition which is often learned in school: put out finished goods, never expose your ignorance. In my observation as a manager and engineer I have seen the following decision making steps used:

1. **Absorb the *stated*** requirement - "stated" does not mean complete problem statement. It means the words used by the problem definer, which sometimes is a solution statement and not a problem statement at all. It is almost always incomplete and not well transmitted to the decision making team.
2. **Quickly develop (leap to?) a direction to solving the *perceived*** requirements. - "perceived" is used because often people do not go back to the requirements provider to see if perception match. "Leap to" is added because often people have a solution in mind and will fit it to any problem that is even close. It is also added because people have a need to make progress, independent of the facts. This is often termed the "ready, fire, aim" way of solving problems.
3. **Organize, fill out and justify** the solution - Once the early decisions are made, the rest of the time is spent putting that solution into practice. Unlike Drucker's step 6 (test the solution) most groups do not want to know if they are right or wrong, but put on blinders to get to the end without being criticized.
4. **Polish the solution for public consumption** - Once the team is comfortable with a decision and have polished it to the point where there are no perceived holes they are willing to be reviewed. The review, from the team's perspective, is organized to get approval, rather than get input on the validity of the solution. This step is often avoided and projects move directly to step 5.
5. **Deliver the finished project** - Project can mean decision, product, paper, or any other delivery to the person who set the team in motion in the first place.
6. **Discover that it is the wrong solution** - The intended solution does not work, is wrong, does not fit the problem and everyone is surprised. How could this many well intentioned people be so wrong? Often it is hard to figure out what went wrong because so much time has passed that there is no accountability.
7. **Recovery** - The process of recovering from these early bad decisions takes costs the organization a great deal, in direct and indirect charges. Recovery can mean, abandon the project, or it can mean expend huge efforts to make it right. Once people have discovered that the decision process was flawed, the company's "good decision maker" is installed to head the project and recovery eventually does occur.

This scenario is far too common, and unnecessary. It is easier to have a broader team review the various stages of the decision process in order to provide collective insight in eliminating unproductive choices. The successful organization must take positive action to help people by establishing decision making methodologies and making them be more broadly accepted and used.

Clearly, all business decisions have risk and need to be viewed in that light. A great decision one day may turn into a stinker the next day, so re-evaluation on periodic basis is a constant need. However, at each step the methodology is the same and if followed will usually lead to the best decision at any point in time.

What is a decision process?

Approach Reviews (cont.)

A decision process is a set of activities that help select a solution for a particular problem. Making decisions is the process of picking one solution over others, eliminating options and taking the risk that the specific solution is good enough to be used. It is also the personal risk of taking sides and perhaps being wrong.

Decision making is a complex and difficult process involving personal risk and ego in addition to the complexities of the problem at hand. While a good process does not guarantee good decisions, a good process does offer real hope of systematically improving decisions. Clearly, we have learned that too many rules and constraints create an unworkable environment for organizations as well. Put another way, "you can do anything wrong".

While too many rules can stop any decisions from being made, it does not naturally follow that no rules is the right answer. The obvious answer is balance. What is being urged here, is clearly defining for the people involved what the rules are for moving ahead. What is also being argued here is that review, is an essential part of any decision process and there are ways of doing it right and wrong.

Barriers to good decisions are everywhere. The individual involved in decision making may be overwhelmed with the risk of being wrong, significantly clouding the decision making process. Sometimes people want to be the center of attention and feel that being seen as decisive will cause people to see them as a leader and important, no matter what the decision. Sometimes people fall in love with a particular idea, technology, or image and no matter what the problem they will come up with that solution. Sometimes people are just being political and do not want to allow the person proposing the idea any credit for ever getting anything right, so they will fight that persons decisions. Sometimes people are competing for resources and subverting another's good decisions may get more resources applied to a pet project, so the bad decision for one person may be a great decision for the other person. Sometimes the problem is very complex and people do not want to admit they do not know how to solve it.

As a consequence, decisions are often made and not broadcast. Keeping decisions private makes them intractable event, as does letting people do as they think best with no check and balance. Put another way, blind trust does not work. While trust is an essential part of any organization, it is not trust, but help that is important here. Teams work best when the team is looking out for the whole of the project and is willing to face the facts, no matter how difficult. A good process will ferret out the emotional constraints to making good decisions.

Review

Rule 1: Review early and often.

Decision making, like nature, abhors a vacuum. People, with very few exceptions, need the interaction with other people to think clearly, make good decisions, and not lie to themselves. This interaction is often referred to as synergy and basically means two or more heads are better than one.

There is a myth that truly great thinkers sit by themselves and create great things. These myths create false role models for all of us that are dangerous to try and emulate. In art we have Vincent Van Gogh who made great paintings that nobody recognized. We have the picture to Tycho Brahe measuring the planets and the stars alone at night collecting data for Kepler. We have Alexander Bell inventing the telephone. We have Ludwig von Beethoven writing the Ninth Symphony alone and deaf. There are people who can do things on their own but they are so few and far between that they are the stuff of myth. Mere mortals cannot operate alone.

The rest of us need the interaction with other people if we are to rise above ourselves to do great things. These interactions should be with those people who can help us most in solving the problems at hand, not

Approach Reviews (cont.)

just kind people who will not hurt our feelings. These interactions can be constructive, or destructive, depending on the people involved and the rules of engagement. If the rules are too laden with process, the review turns into a decision prevention meeting. If the process is strong, then the review helps make better decisions.

Review, is fundamental to all business process, from the board of directors to the security guard and everything in between. There are three big reasons we need the interaction with others.

First, when an individual needs to explain what they are doing to other people, their thinking process changes significantly, focusing their mind and creating a clarity that otherwise remains elusive. This same clarity sometimes comes from writing ideas down in an orderly fashion, but doing so in front of others is much more effective. Think back at how often you have been unable to continue on some problem and in seeking help find that half way through describing the problem to someone we see the solution, before the other person even spoke.

Warren Buffet is reputed to have said that if you take a person trying to solve a problem and have him explain it to a Baboon, the individual will come away a smarter person. The point here is that it is a fact that explaining yourself often gives you clarity that was not there before the attempt to explain (see Thinking Fast and Slow).

Second, it is just too easy to lie to yourself, intentionally or otherwise. We all have blind spots that keep us from seeing every implication of our efforts. It is much like proofreading, which needs to be done by another person because we just can't see what we did not write, our minds will fill in the blanks. Having other people review our work will find many of the things we do not see because the other minds will not fill in those blanks. Besides, it is easy to criticize, we all do it. So why not take advantage of people's real strength and have them help you with your problem.

Lastly, we just cannot expect of ourselves that we alone have, or find, all of the answers to a given problem. Other people will often provide us with other ways of looking at the problem or alternative solutions. I've heard of a class that teaches Synergy by having people first list all of the things they would do to save themselves if they found themselves stranded in the Alaska tundra all alone. Next they break into groups and compare notes, creating a consolidated list of life saving things to do. The consolidate list is almost always longer, meaning that the probability of living is greater if other people are there to help.

The hard part in seeking help comes from our inner need to get credit as well as our years of schooling that taught us to value doing things alone. In school, collaboration is often called plagiarism and is grounds for being dismissed. In business, we call it clever and reward people. It is our ego, our need for credit, our desire to shine, and our belief that help cheapens us that keeps us from finding a way to get help to our problem solving.

While there are many rules and papers on how to run reviews, there are a few basic rules that when followed make reviews much more helpful:

1. Distribute a proposal ahead of time - Having people come to the review prepared makes it easier to get good input. If at all possible having the comments returned before the review helps the reviewee prepare for the review. When advanced distribution is not possible, the reviewee should prepare a discussion of the proposal so that everyone can understand what is being reviewed.
2. Have a chairperson and a note-taker - The reviewee is too busy trying to understand the issues to be able to manage the flow of a review meeting, besides those making comments would not like the reviewee to cut off debate on a controversial input. The chairperson is responsible for keeping the meeting on track. Taking notes of the issues raised, will make everyone know that issues are not just going to be forgotten or ignored by the reviewee. The chairperson can be the note-taker but that is not required.

Approach Reviews (cont.)

3. Raise issues, do not solve them - The objective of the review is to find problems with the proposal and to raise them with sufficient clarity that the everyone understands them acknowledges their priority. The review is not a working meeting to solve the problems, which is also a good thing to do, but rather a meeting to help the reviewee see where more effort is needed to arrive at a more complete, or acceptable proposal.

What Problem Are You Solving

In my experience the primary cause of poor decision making among well intentioned people is that they do not clearly understand what problem they are solving. Stating a problem clearly is often quite difficult to do and something that is avoided by most people for a variety of reasons. Often, when a clear easy to understand problem statement is finally produced the solution leaps off the page.

Rule 2: A clear, short, comprehensible agreed upon statement of the problem should be produced before the decision is made.

Communication is a difficult thing to accomplish well in the best of situations. Problem statements are no exception to the rule. People think they understand and they often do not understand the problem. Too often only part of the problems, or requirements, are stated. Sometimes they are stated in a confusing manner. Sometimes they are stated in contradictory manners. Often, the person with the problem does not understand the possible solutions enough to know the problem was stated in a confusing manner.

Perhaps an example would help make the point. I have given this set of steps as a set of slides to several groups, always getting similar results. As you read each requirement assume that the accumulated requirements represent all the information you have and think about what the proper solution might be:

Requirement #1: Build a travelling canvas bag to cover my computer.

Solution #1: _____

Requirement #2: Add a strap for the bag

Solution #2: _____

Requirement #3: Make it of waterproof canvas, in case of rain

Solution #3: _____

Requirement #4: Add padding to avoid damage to the computer

Solution #4: _____

Requirement #5: bag is to hold my high-end workstation and 32" monitor in the back of my pick up as I drive cross country.

Solution #5: _____

If you are like most people you assumed that the requirements were for a canvas bag for a lap-top. It was not until the last requirement that the original solution seemed entirely wrong. While this specific example is made up, it is not at all a situation that is made up. People will often produce the bag for the lap-top before asking enough questions to figure out that it was for a large workstation. Assuming the problem, or assuming the understanding of the problem leads to poor decisions.

Another pitfall of getting at the problem definition is when people are overwhelmed by what they see as the complexities of the decision. Sometimes, these complexities are real, sometimes imagined. In most cases, people are reluctant to show others that they are overwhelmed. Sometimes, the imagined problem is just a part of the real problem. Sometimes, the imagined problem is not even close to the real problem.

Approach Review

Rule 3: Require review of the basic solution within a few days, long before people think they are ready. Review before people think they are ready.

The basic premise of the Approach Review is that when faced with a task, meaning when asked to solve a problem, people almost always make up their minds on the basic solution very (very!) early in the process and therefore they should be reviewed at that time. These early directional decisions often do not change very much as people fill out these decisions. This may seem extraordinary at first glance, but it is in fact true. People leap to an answer much earlier than they will usually admit to others, or even to themselves. The approach review is specifically geared towards reviewing people's work *before* they think they are ready for review.

Given that people do in fact make up their minds early, every bit of effort after that early decision point is potentially wasted time if the problem statement was not clear and the solution not appropriate. Reviewing the problem and the solution at the point of this decision, is what an Approach Review is about.

The psychology of decision making is such that when people have invested in a particular effort, created personal capital, they are reluctant to throw away that investment, *even if it is wrong*. The greater the personal capital, the greater the resistance to change. An Approach Review is focused on reviewing things when the personal capital is low, but the basic problem statement and solution, even at a high level, are known.

Solving problems is an iterative activity starting with the big decisions and working down to the smaller decisions. In a well running system, the big decisions are reviewed sufficiently to make the probability of them changing low. As each successive step occurs, the risks are reduced. Within each of those steps, that is in the process of making

Most people are extremely reluctant to show what they are doing until they have reached some level of completeness, avoiding criticism and simultaneously getting praise for doing a great job. The years we spend in the school system certainly trains us to only come forward with our best shot. Most organizations are geared towards the notion of polish, completeness, and the notion of "don't waste my time 'till you are done".

Rule 4: In Approach Reviews, expect to find things wrong

Since we are reviewing before people are ready we do not expect perfection. The whole point is to shorten the time it takes to get to a good answer by getting the people who can help the most into the review process. So a new mentality has to take hold. There are two main points that the Approach Review is trying to get straight:

1. Is the team solving the intended problem?
2. Is the solution a reasonable one?

The Approach Review is a place to help someone find errors, not to be ashamed of being wrong.

Rule 5: Is the team solving the intended problem

Is the solution a reasonable one? Does the solution make sense relative to the **written** problem statement? Is the solution too big, too small, off entirely? The point of a review is to get new eyes on the situation and help the team see what it can't necessarily see for itself.

Approach Reviews (cont.)

Rule 6: If it seems wrong, don't let it go.

Far too often things really seem wrong, but people do not want to embarrass others by mentioning it. In polite society we are taught to leave people alone when they are uncomfortable. We have all sorts of habits that cause us to back off when a friend or acquaintance seem uncomfortable. In business, we are following different rules of interaction. In business, getting it right is more important than someone's feelings. That does not mean we should be insensitive, it means we should find tactful ways of being dogged about the fact that something is wrong that needs to be fixed.

In Summary

"Get it right" is the essence of the struggle and is the final goal of all decision making. While there may or may not be a totally "right" answer, there are many wrong answers. The goal of the Approach Review is not perfection. Its goal is to minimize the time spent and maximize the solution to problem fit. While we are not looking for perfection, we are looking for great solutions and getting clear and helpful review in a timely manner increases the odds of having the right solutions moving forward.

In the *Empire Strikes Back* Yoda, the Jedi Master, says to Luke after he proposed to "try" rather than to go for a victory, "Try not, only do or do not." While effort is truly important at the end of the day it is what was delivered that matters. We need to be willing to pay the price for getting it right.