

A Modest Process Area Proposal: “Blame Allocation”

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Background

- With apologies to Jonathan Swift...
- Process Areas in the CMMI[®] family of models are clusters of related practices, connected to topics considered essential to process improvement
- It is proposed (modestly, of course) that a new Process Area be added, to cover an activity that seems to be a central focus in many organizations: Blame Allocation

Process Area Purpose

- The purpose of Blame Allocation (BA) is to ensure that, for every instance of things going seriously wrong, a politically acceptable guilty culprit is identified rapidly and visibly, with punishment meted out as warranted.
- Originally seen as a Project Management PA, but now accepted as a Support PA
- Assigned to Maturity Level 3, since practically everything else is assigned to ML 3

Introductory Notes

- The scope of this process area is very broad, including blame for any of the following:
 - Failure to meet cost and schedule targets
 - Failure to achieve technical objectives
 - Failure to satisfy customers in any way
 - Failure to achieve process improvement targets or desired appraisal outcomes
- In allocating blame, the critical principle is that higher-level managers must always be insulated from any responsibility or accountability
- Thus, blame should be allocated to the lowest credible, but politically defenseless, level possible

Specific Goal 1: Prepare for Blame Allocation

- Specific Practice 1.1: Identify Blame-Eligible Groups and Individuals
 - Pro-active blame allocation does not wait for the failure or disaster to happen. Even when things are going well, candidate blame targets are being identified
 - To be eligible, blame targets must have enough of a role that blaming them is credible, but not enough political influence to protect themselves
 - In small organizations, it may be necessary to identify blame targets outside the organization (competition, economic conditions, flaws in tools, even customers)

Specific Goal 1: Prepare for Blame Allocation

- Specific Practice 1.2: Identify Blame-Ineligible (Protected) Positions and Levels
 - At the same time that blame targets are being identified, the levels of management that are to be blame-ineligible, or "protected", should be identified
 - People typically made blame-ineligible include:
 - Those with authority over budget, hiring, or project "green light" decisions
 - Those with closed-door private offices, reserved parking spaces, keys to executive washrooms, etc.
 - Children, siblings, spouses, or others with "special relationships" with blame-ineligible persons

Specific Goal 1: Prepare for Blame Allocation

- **Specific Practice 1.3: Establish Guidelines for Blame Allocation**
 - Not every failure is significant enough to require full blame allocation; the decision to proceed should be based on established guidelines, such as:
 - Whether the failure has resulted in sufficient levels of public embarrassment
 - Whether the damage caused by the failure will force painful cut-backs or re-allocations
 - Whether the direct cause of the failure can be traced to actions by protected persons, forcing the identification of alternative guilty culprits

Specific Goal 2: Perform Blame Allocation

- **Specific Practice 2.1: Align the Number and Level of Guilty Culprits with the Magnitude of the Failure**
 - Once there is a failure or disaster that satisfies the criteria established in SP 1.3, further analysis is still needed to establish the amount of blame to be allocated
 - Some failures can be handled by blaming a single hapless individual; other, larger failures require blaming small groups, or even entire teams or units
 - Proper alignment is critical; blaming too few can damage credibility, while blaming too many can impact morale

Specific Goal 2: Perform Blame Allocation

- **Specific Practice 2.2: Assign Blame to Guilty Culprits**
 - This is the central practice of this PA, and the one appraisers will look at most closely
 - A number of guilty culprits, consistent with the analysis done under SP 2.1, must be chosen from the blame-eligible persons or groups identified under SP 1.1
 - Naming them is not sufficient; a story must be concocted to justify why the named guilty culprits deserve blame for the failure or disaster
 - A story hinting at, but not specifying, even broader guilt or blame can be more effective

Specific Goal 2: Perform Blame Allocation

- Specific Practice 2.3: Communicate Blame Assignment to Relevant Stakeholders and Other Interested Onlookers
 - The assignment of blame, and the story concocted to justify the assignment, have little value if they are not properly publicized
 - Typically, the blame assignment should be communicated to:
 - All blame-eligible persons, including the guilty culprits themselves
 - All protected persons, especially those involved in the failure or disaster who are not being blamed
 - Anyone with direct or indirect knowledge of the original failure or disaster

Specific Goal 3: Hand Down Consequences

- Specific Practice 3.1: Demote, Re-assign, or Terminate Guilty Culprits, As Appropriate
 - The handing down of punishment, while satisfying in many ways, must be aligned with the magnitude of the failure or disaster, keeping in mind the trade-off:
 - Too little punishment, and the blame allocation may not be taken seriously enough
 - Too much punishment, and the list of blame-eligible groups and individuals may become depleted, leading to difficulties with blame allocation when the next failure occurs
 - In some cases, active recruitment of new blame-eligible replacements may be warranted

Specific Goal 3: Hand Down Consequences

- Specific Practice 3.2: Recognize and Reward Blame Allocators for their Decisive Action
 - In order to avoid the development of a blame-centered culture in an organization, it is often important to balance major blame allocation and punishment activities with corresponding recognition and reward activities
 - Recognition and reward will typically be directed at the blame-ineligible (protected) persons most closely associated with the failure or disaster, in recognition of their prompt and decisive blame allocation actions
 - Identify sources of grumbling and derision regarding such recognition and rewards; these can become new blame-eligible candidates

Highlights of Generic Practices

- GP 2.2, Plan the Process: While some activities (e.g., identifying blame-eligibles) can be done on a scheduled basis, most PA activities can only be planned in response to a given failure or disaster
- GP 2.5, Train People: Non-traditional but effective sources of training include episodes of “The Simpsons” involving Mr. Burns and selected “Dilbert” strips
- GP 2.9, Objectively Evaluate Adherence: QA personnel who report unfavorable audit results may be another source of blame-eligibles
- GP 2.10, Review Status with Higher Level Management: You may be “protected” at your level, but higher level management may still classify you as blame-eligible

Conclusions

- Blame Allocation as described here is widely practiced in organizations; curiously, it is rare in organizations with substantial process maturity achievements
- Blame Allocation has not yet been submitted as a formal CMMI[®] Change Request, so there's still time to add ideas from your experience
- Note that there is a pattern and template to Process Areas, and it can be a useful exercise to design and build your own PA (for fun or for capturing important local process ideas)
- Thanks for your attention!

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