

HOW DO YOU MAKE THAT DECISION?

TRACY OWENS | FISHER COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

You've seen so many Kaizen events, and you've helped construct big process maps with sticky notes and markers on long unrolled pieces of white paper. It really is an inspiring image – to walk into a room where Kaizen is being practiced and see such a colorful display of process analysis and improvement all over the walls. Like the first time you step into Ohio Stadium – it can take your breath away!

The symbols and colors used by the team often depend on the preference of the facilitator. There are some standard process mapping symbols, though: the rectangular box is used for each step in the process, arrows are used to connect those boxes, and swim lanes are usually drawn between functional departments to delineate the responsibilities among the various participants in this work.

One very important symbol plays a prominent role in process mapping – the Decision Box. Shaped like a diamond, it marks a point in the process where the operator will ask a question, the answer to which will influence the next thing that happens. For example, the Decision Box might say, “Is the case too small?” If the answer is “No”, then the process continues and the item is placed in the case. If the answer is “Yes”, however, then the

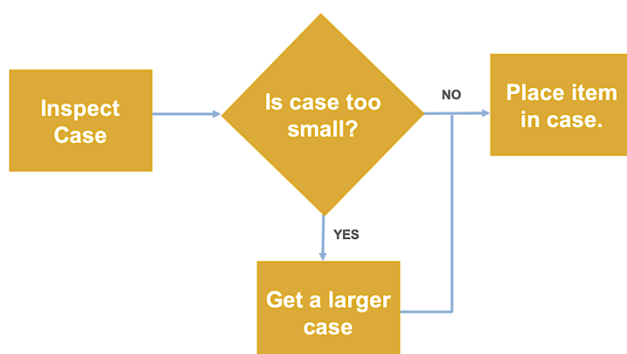
process will go in another direction where someone will select a larger case.

“Yes” and “No” answers are very clear and should be encouraged in process mapping. There are definitely other options, but for this story I'll stay with those two polar responses.

It might be easy for an operator to check whether the case is too small or not. You could attempt to put the item into the case and, if it doesn't fit, you'll need to answer “Yes”.

Sometimes the answer is not as clear as fitting something into a case.

Take, for instance, the frequently occurring Decision Box regarding an approval. There is often a need to share your work with another person and seek that person's approval before you send the finished product to the next department on your map or to your customer. That decision – whether to approve the work – may not be clearly understood just by reading a Decision Box like the one to the right.



The process map is intended as a tool to help everyone understand as much as possible about the work that is being done. It is drawn from the point of view of the item that is being built or the service that will be performed, so all the operators are just role players who transform inputs into outputs. No one is singled out for blame or praise in the process map, it simply tells the story of what happens. To achieve that goal, it is necessary for

the process map to spell out in detail the activities in each swim lane.

Largely overlooked for added definition is the Decision Box. It is accepted as a fact of life: “Approval, Yes or No”. Those in the room may have, or may think they have, and understanding of how each decision is made, but anyone who reads the process map later, after the discussion in the conference room has ended, will be left with questions about the question that is written on the half-spun sticky note.

SHOW THE DECISION CRITERIA ON THE MAP

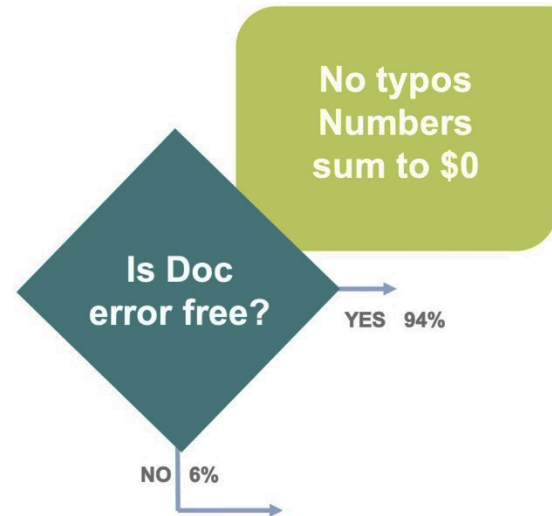
To add clarity to the process map, write the criteria that the operator or approver uses to answer the question and place that supplementary sticky note on the map next to the Decision Box. In our scenario it may only be possible to approve the transaction if it is less than \$5,000, if it is within a 2-day application limit, and if it is for a new client. We write those criteria on an unused color sticky note and, instead of the lonely, vague blue box, we now have:



MORE ADDED VALUE – HOW OFTEN?

One more thing on Decision Boxes: usually the “Yes” and “No” answers emerging from adjacent corners of the box are written with letters of equal size, but not always do both responses occur with equal frequency. Write the proportion of time that each answer has been used. You can decide how much history to include: the last 6 months, the last 100 transactions, the last year, whatever is necessary to explain the current situation. Then, when you have shown how often the undesirable result occurs, you may decide with your team how urgently you need to address that problem.

If you have three problems depicted on a flowchart and one of them happens 30% of the time and the others happen less than 5% of the time, you may be able to make a better decision about where to focus your efforts. These two tips will make your Decision Boxes even more valuable.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Owens is a business transformation leader who has driven his employers and client organizations to achieve near-term objectives and better long-term results through innovation and quality management.

As an ASQ Certified Quality Engineer and Certified Manager of Quality and Organizational Excellence, he has strengthened operational capability and process improvement expertise among all the teams he has supported since 1998. His book *Six Sigma Green Belt, Round 2* was published by Quality Press in 2011 and serves as a guide for successful improvement project execution. As a founding member of ASQ’s Innovation Division, Tracy has promoted a growing body of knowledge on innovation management and brought his audiences a strong message about innovation as a process and not just a creative spark. He is co-author of *The Executive Guide to Innovation*, which was published in 2013. Tracy holds a Master’s Degree in International Business from Seattle University, was elected to the 2016 class of ASQ Fellows, and is currently a part-time faculty member at The Ohio State Fisher College of Business.