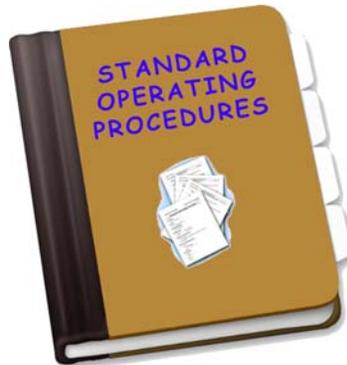


Redefine SOP¹

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Most organizations establish Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) to describe the way things should be done.

The use of SOP's has been around for over a century. As far back as the early 1900's, Frederick Winslow Taylor, the father of modern scientific management, was implementing Standard Operating Procedures for Henry Ford. Subsequently, SOP's became a very important component of TQM or *Total Quality Management* and other process improvement techniques.

Basically, a Standard Operating Procedure is a set of instructions that details the steps of a set of operations, a standard set of instructions—a *directive* for how to accomplish an operation.

Unfortunately, SOP's have fed the rigidity of bureaucracies—too many managers use SOP's to micromanage their employees. Unfortunately, establishing Standard Operating Procedures has become synonymous with “my way or the highway.” Employees working under these conditions have no freedom to innovate or redesign work processes. In this kind of climate, employees become automatons and organizations have difficulty adapting to rapid changes in the marketplace.



Yes, there are many situations in which detailed steps *must* be carefully followed, such as those associated with legal regulations or safety issues. However, the steps involved in most organizational processes are open to some degree of flexibility. The only thing they all share is some kind of objective, some kind of desired end result. Achieving that objective is far less important than how it is achieved.

Employees who are charged with following a given SOP often have ideas of how it could be done more efficiently or effectively. Their ideas are frequently dismissed or overlooked, because—after all—there are SOP's that must be followed.

It is time to redefine the term “SOP.” Instead of “Standard Operating Procedures,” I suggest defining SOP as *Standards and Operating Processes*.

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

This very small change of words has three very important implications for how work is done.

1. **First, “Standards And Operating Processes” focuses people on adhering to and/or achieving *standards*, rather than on doing things in standard ways.**

Again, it is true that some standards, such as safety standards, are mandated by laws and call for very specific actions. In these cases, it is critical that people follow standard operating procedures. However, many others, such as communicating with and satisfying customers, tolerate more flexible procedures.

2. **Second, conceptualizing “Standards and Operating Processes” allows for the meeting of specified standards with continuously *adaptive processes*.**

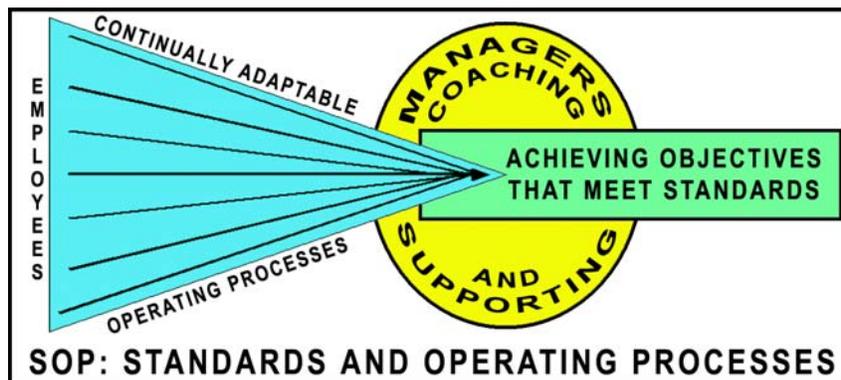
The focus is more on processes that can be improved and changed to meet the established standards in the face of changing market conditions. In other words, a standard can be met in a variety of ways, depending on regulatory requirements, the demands of the marketplace, and the skills and talents of individual employees.

The term “Standard Operating Procedure” does not suggest such adaptability.

3. **Third, *managers* who think of SOP’s in terms of “operating processes designed to achieve objectives that meet specified standards” more likely will view their role as helping employees continually adapt to changing conditions.**

These managers will give employees greater flexibility and control in accomplishing what they are charged to accomplish. With the knowledge of what objective must be achieved, and with their differing personalities, skills, and talents, employees may differ in how they accomplish the objective.

In this kind of working environment, employees feel a greater sense of ownership of their work. They then feel more responsible for what they do. And, managers focus more on coaching and supporting employees, rather than micromanaging them.



Viewing SOP’s as *Standards and Operating Processes*, rather than “Standard Operating Procedures” will result in a happier, more productive workforce—employees will be more self-motivated to do their best. The organization will be capable of more quickly adapting to sudden changes in the demands of the marketplace.

This shift in conceptualizing SOP is especially important to service organizations, which are constantly adapting to different client needs as economic conditions and competitors change. Even if standards don’t change as a result of such changes, their supporting processes often need to be modified.

The more flexible are the processes for meeting standards, the easier it is for employees to adjust to the demands of a given client or situation. This, in turn, results in employees feeling more empowered and self-motivated to perform at their best.