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How Do You Work Impediments?

Characteristics

There is no one process to work impediments that will work in all cases. There are common characteristics of an impediment removal system:

1. Single intake system: There is a common way to capture the impediments. There is a good understanding of what kinds of impediments should flow to what parts of the organization. Note that you may have to process a few impediments to figure this out.
2. Transparency: There is a clear, visible-to-all, flow associated with resolving impediments.
3. Planning: There is clear understanding of current expectations for delivery and current priorities.
4. Metrics: On-going use of metrics to understand the impact of impediment removal.

Example Approach

Let us take these characteristics and apply them to set up an operational impediment removal system. For this case we are going to assume that this is a leadership team who are interested in improving the flow of value delivery across the entire organization.

Single Intake System

In this example, there are two sources of work for this group:

1. Cross-program impediments: Teams and Programs have not been able resolve the impediment and so it us up to the leadership team. An example might be “The corporate system security procedures require extensive documentation to pass, and forces development through a long approval cycle. This results in a delay of value delivery to our customers of up to 3 months per group of features delivered”.
2. Organizational impediments: These might be related to problems that the Leadership have identified themselves. An example might be “Our people are still being partially allocated to project work resulting in an inability to make and consistently meet commitments. This results in delays of value delivery when multiple people are required to get something out the door, and a loss of trust with our customers.”

The leadership team got together with some of their key stakeholders, in this case some Program Team members. They came to a working agreement about how they would take in impediments so there was a single view of all the impediments they need to work. They decided:

1. Program Team members and the Leadership Team are the primary source of impediments.
2. The format of an impediment is a description of the impediment (the “what”) including a view of who it effects, a description of the impact the impediment is having on the system of delivery (the

"so what"), and the primary person interested in driving the discussion.
3. Impediments will all be recorded in a "Systematic Impediment Backlog" in the "boards" tool.

Transparency

The initial thought of the Leadership team was that they'd track and show their work in an Excel spreadsheet. But then they realized that all their Teams are putting their work into a Kanban tool and that this practice enabled anyone who was interested in the work to see what the Team was up to.

The Leadership team pivoted, decided to put their work into Kanban board. They created a Kanban board called "Systematic Impediments".

They then thought through how they'd like to work on impediments. This discussion leads a working agreement for the following Kanban states aimed at tracking an impediment through to resolution:

- Backlog: All new impediments here.
- Designing: Identify a number of potential ideas, experiments, aimed at reducing the effect of the impediment and improving resultant flow of value. The design includes a discussion of "how will we know" we are actually helping as well as a time box to review the results.
- Established: Ideas are now being actively tried. Perhaps two or three ideas for a particular impediment might be set up.
- Measuring: Data is being collected against each of the ideas. At the end of the time box, this data will be used to determine what to do next.
- Improving: Using the data, we know what ideas actually resulted in improvements. We then need to make sure that these ideas are operationalized.
- Done: Impediment is closed and we can move onto another impediment.

Like all Kanban systems, the Leadership team discussed WIP limits on the Kanban states. The Leadership team were understandably concerned that they would try to take on too much work, and not actually complete anything. They therefore set the WIP limits to 1 for "Designing", and 3 for "Established" (multiple ideas as a result of a design process) and "Measuring", and 1 for "Improving" (mainly to make sure this was done properly).

Planning

The Leadership team also established a number of additional working agreements:

- The backlog would be prioritized based on the importance to the system by the whole Leadership team "Backlog Refinement" meeting held every 2 weeks.
- Each impediment being worked had (2) co-leads identified. This was set up to spread the load of working these items. Co-leads are responsible for working the impediments and communicating with the relevant stakeholders.
- Leadership are expected to "pull" impediments work and, in particular, not simply wait for people to ask to address an issue.
- Every Tuesday and Thursday, the Leadership team would have a brief meeting to discuss how their work is going and address any problems they have.

- Every 2 weeks, the Leadership team would get together and discuss how to improve the impediment system they have put in place.

The only thing left for the Leadership team was to make sure that various stakeholders were aware of what they had set up.

FAQ, Impediment, Removal, Organization