Making ITIL Work For You

By Marvin Waschke

A TECHNICAL SUPPORT MANAGER CONFRONTED WITH IMPLEMENTATION OF ITIL Incident and Problem Management practices is often in a tough spot. Change is never easy. A good manager with a healthy process and a strong staff may be in an even tougher spot, because there is no apparent need for change, and improvement may be hard to show. Fortunately, in most cases implementing ITIL practices does result in improvement. Most support groups that have gone through an implementation are happy with the results, and senior management, from the CIO on up, are also usually happy with the results.

But the first steps can be painful. The first reaction to any kind of change is to ask "Why are you punishing me?" It is no surprise that people react strongly to a complete revision of the way they do their business. And ITIL implementation is a new way to do the technical support business.

Let's answer the first question: Why me? Why does ITIL have to begin at the service desk? The answer: Implementing an ITIL service desk is easy. Perhaps "relatively easy" compared to other ITIL practices is a better description. There are several reasons for this.

ITIL Incident and Problem Management are systematic applications of practices that most good support groups already follow in some form. Sites that prioritize issues by business value and address root causes are already close to the ITIL practices. The group may need to change their terminology some, but chances are very good that changing their practices will be straightforward and easily understood, even welcomed.

Unlike many other ITIL best practices, implementation of ITIL Incident and Problem Management is self-contained. Practice changes can be limited to the support group. A practice that requires groups to work together faces obstacles that do not exist within a single group. These range from difficulty picking places and times to meet, to bitter turf wars over shifting responsibilities.

Consequently, implementing incident and problem management has a high probability of success. The implementation is usually quick and readily accepted by the participants. If a company is planning a much wider implementation, success in incident and problem management reduces skepticism and paves the way for future success.

Consequently, consultants almost always recommend that ITIL® implementation begins with Incident and Problem Management.

HOW DO ITIL INCIDENT AND PROBLEM MANAGEMENT DIFFER FROM TYPICAL TECHNICAL SUPPORT DESK PRACTICE?

In a typical practice, most support desks have level one and level two groups. Said bluntly, level one takes the calls and solves the easy ones. Level two takes whatever is left. There are also field technicians. Ordinarily, level one and level two work from their desks. If hands-on-work is required, a field technician is dispatched. The field technician

goes out and replaces the failed part or does whatever hands-on work is required.

ITIL Incident and Problem Management streamline support around business service alignment. ITIL Incident Management is something like level one support. Incident managers are the first line at the service desk. They receive the first news that something is wrong. Their job is to restore service, not solve problems. Traditional support philosophy emphasizes proactive discovery and elimination of problems to reduce costs and quickly close issues. ITIL does not discourage this attitude, but puts it in its proper place. When a critical service is impaired, restoring the service must be the first priority. When the service is restored, there is plenty of time to solve the underlying problem. Unfortunately, any support manager will tell you that there is never time to solve problems after service is restored. By then, the next issue has absorbed all the energy and mindshare. Solving the problem while the issue is open is the only way to make time for problem solving.

ITIL addresses the lack of time for problem solving by establishing a separate practice called Problem Management. Problem manager is not another name for a level two technician. In typical non-ITIL practice, a level two technician is a super level one technician who has more sophisticated technical skills for resolving more difficult issues. The technical skills of a senior incident manager should at least equal the skills of a senior problem manager, and there is a very good argument for placing the very best technical talent into the senior incident manager role. A successful incident manager has only seconds to accurately assess a highly technical situation and begin steps to restore service. These split second decisions are often the tipping point between a minor incident and a full-blown crisis.

Not all businesses implement Problem Management at the same time that Incident Management is rolled out. Problem management requires a greater degree of sophistication, and is most easily implemented when a support group already has a healthy proactive support policy. Problem management is not a place for instant decisions. After the incident management group has restored service, the problem managers step in. Their job is to prevent future incidents by finding the causes, then proposing, and sometimes implementing, fixes. A fix can be as simple as documenting the problem as a known error and describing a recovery procedure. In other cases, a fix may involve replacing or reconfiguring components of the system.

In some shops, the problem management group will undertake this work themselves. Whether problem management does the work or whether another implementation group does the work, changes to the configuration of the systems must be controlled through a change management system that ensures that all changes are properly recorded, authorized, and rolled out without disrupting production.

An ITIL® shop mixes the level one and level two technical distinctions. An incident management group will typically have a mixture of more skilled and less skilled technicians, as will a problem management group. There is often trading and cross training between the two groups. The two groups have distinct tasks, but the tasks are very closely related and the two groups benefit from ready communications.

ITIL Incident and Problem Management are driven by key performance indicators that often differ from typical non-ITIL indicators.

Every support issue has a cost. The very cheapest issues are solved by a user consulting a knowledge base. Next cheapest are issues solved by level one with a single response to a self service issue entered by the end user without a telephone call to the support desk. If a call is required, the cost goes up again but it is minimized if the issue can be closed in the initial call. As the number of contacts with the user increases, the cost increases. Issues that involve a field technician or level two are much more expensive.

In typical practice, the support group has two hard key performance indicators (KPIs): resolve issues as quickly as possible and keep the resolution cost as low as possible. User satisfaction is a soft KPI, but still important to most groups. A support group that closes their issues quickly at low cost and still keeps their user base happy is successful.

A basic theme in ITIL is to move away from performance indicators that are not aligned to business services. The 'quick and cheap' KPIs enforce laudable general goals but they are not aligned with business services. In an ITIL implementation, these general KPIs are replaced by KPIs that relate more clearly to service levels on business services. An example KPI might be, "minimize incident open time on critical business servers." Under this KPI, a support group that never has a business server incident is rewarded, which is precisely aligned with the business service requirement that the service not be interrupted. This gives the team incentive to restore service quickly and exercise good problem management to avoid future interruptions. The traditional KPIs only provide general guidance. They do not directly address critical business service issues.

Many technical support groups have evolved their own practices that closely parallel ITIL® practices. Most technical support groups pay attention to critical business services and give their incidents a high priority. Service restoration is important to everyone. And most groups have the will, if not the means, to address critical incidents proactively. Instead of replacing these practices, ITIL Incident and Problem Management provide a published framework for support organization that is tailored to underpin these practices.

The most confusing aspect of an ITIL support implementation is confusion over the roles of incident managers and problem managers. Groups go wrong by suggesting that problem management is level two with a different name and implying that problem management is for the support elite. In fact, as explained above, incident management requires technical talents that may exceed those of problem management.

Good support managers will work hard to dispel this illusion and allocate talent carefully. This will avoid a situation where ITIL practice is the old practice with different labels. When ITIL is only terminology, it becomes very difficult to show any return on the expense of implementation.

If the support staff is properly trained so they understand the goals of ITIL support, and they are motivated with KPIs that reflect the ITIL orientation toward business alignment, the chances of success are increased and the support group will become a more significant player in the attainment of corporate goals. ✪

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