

# Atlanta SPIN

Software & Systems Process Improvement Network

The Atlanta SPINnaker

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Mark Sohl

## Building a Trusted Relationship with Business—the Key to Successful Process Improvement Efforts

Mark Sohl — Chestatee River Group

Our October speaker, Mark Sohl, represented a departure from our typical SPIN speakers. Rather than talk about methodologies, tools, and technical tips Mark chose to enter the even more mysterious realm - of people!

Mark began with a short synopsis of his 20 year career with Delta, beginning with his modest start as “parts cleaner.” Alternating subsequent opportunities between IT and Marketing, he was recognized as “a guy who gets things done,” so they kept giving him bigger problems – a turnaround of the operations at JFK airport saving “just” around a hundred million per year to become profitable; a re-write of the pilot scheduling program created 10 years

earlier in order to save a few hundred pilots’ jobs; and another turnaround of Delta’s European operations for savings of several hundred million per year were some examples given. Usually these problems had been given to other people who failed to succeed despite a lot of money and energy spent.

Throughout, Mark noted several similarities across all projects. People understand that technology has exploded, and the users are all asking, “why is this so hard?” We have lots of specialized disciplines in IT, and in a lot of ways we have gotten so proficient at the technical aspects of accomplishing tasks that we

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## Next Meeting - November 11, 2009

### Obama, ARRA and Healthcare IT (HIT): Can Improvements in Technology Really Improve Health?” A Panel Discussion



Didi Davis  
President Serendipity Health



Ken Bradley  
VP Strategic Planning Navicure



Paul Stinson  
President, and Founder  
Telos Consulting Group

Time: 6:00 PM—8:30 PM

Location: La Quinta Inn & Suites, 6260 Peachtree-Dunwoody Road, Atlanta, GA 30328

## “Building a Trusted Relationship with Business—the Key to Successful Process Improvement Efforts” (Continued)

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have commoditized ourselves – yet it is still hard to complete a project successfully. Why are these things true?

Mark then asked the audience:

“How do you see yourself? How are you competing in this new world?”

Typically, he pointed out that we are projecting our toolkit, not the person that we are, making us a commodity rather than a value-add service provider. To provide us with an example of how important this is, he told us about his experience buying a pool. He asked the pool man, “How much for just the pool? I don’t need any landscaping, sprinklers, etc.” “\$50,000,” the man said. Nine months and \$140,000 later, they have a VERY nice pool! It was a little late, but the wife & kids are happy. Apart from the money, Mark noticed that the pool man had never tried to educate him on methodology for “how to plumb a pool.” Yet many IT people feel compelled to educate the client – when the client does not need to know and in many cases does not WANT to know “how” they are going to deliver their results.

We as IT people have lost the customer service, value-added part of what we are truly offering. We still today have the opportunity to be perceived as the most competitive alternative anywhere, while still commanding a higher margin.

**What is the way you do that?** We need to offer a better service; a stronger relationship; a stronger related value-set of trust; knowledge; experience; resourcefulness; etc. – not by trying to impose your thoughts on the client, but rather by servicing the client.

Mark believes that there are three separate skill sets important to successful process improvement initiatives. Those skill sets included:

- Change Management methodologies
- Leadership

Unfortunately, **we teach the first of these but fail to teach the other two.** Business process improvement by its nature is change, yet we don’t teach the skills necessary to manage and lead change as the accompaniment to business process improvement. Many people across many silos will be impacted by every change we make, but we are ill-equipped to deal with the wider impact outside of our development teams.

So we typically do well at teaching business process improvements and the methodologies related to it (models and techniques) to “deliver a better answer.” Whether this is CMMI, Six Sigma; ITIL; ISO; etc. or more technical skills like SQL, Java, Dot Net – our tool bags are brimming with technical how-to. On the other had, we consistently fail to teach Change Management. Even when we teach Change Management, we teach a lot of processes and techniques – textbook knowledge is good, but not sufficient. We also fail to teach change management leadership – leading organizations; leading efforts; leading peers; the fundamental ability to understand a vision; a new way of “that process” being; and inspiring people to want to go there because they can emotionally FEEL how it will improve everybody’s life, the company, or whatever change it is you are chasing.

The remainder of the talk discussed three questions which can help us become more competitive in today’s market:

- 1) What are we really doing with Process Improvement?
- 2) How much time should we be investing in building relationships?
- 3) Why is it important?

For the first, we must change the way we think about ourselves. We are not “Business Process Improvement” people – we are “Leaders of Change.” Start by listening to the person who brought you into the situation, and understand - what perspective do they have? To that person the organizational adoption, culture, and

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## “Building a Trusted Relationship with Business—the Key to Successful Process Improvement Efforts” ” (Continued)

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partnership to really implement are foremost. Then what is your real role? Is it to “document current state, future state, and how you’re going to get from-to?” Or is it to be “the customer service oriented value added service provider to that client to help him or her lead change, to do it in a way so as to build stronger partnerships and a desire to get to the goal as quickly as possible for everybody’s mutual benefit?”

To address the second question, we each need to develop a portfolio of investment of our time. There is no one “right” answer, but by trying to do EVERYTHING you guarantee failure. Building relationships is the most important thing you can do. Building relationships is not “networking” - it is listening, learning, and gaining the perspectives you need to do the job you’ve been asked to do.

Unless you build a relationship with ALL of the constituents involved in a process, your ability to give a fact-based assessment and proposal of a desirable future state process is limited, as is your ability to get the support of those constituents to successfully implement that vision. McKinsey is the best at this in Mark’s opinion. They drill in a process that focuses on the process that PEOPLE go through, not through the analytical problem-solving process. Their process yields people able to consistently re-state the PROBLEM, not the solution, and in the process getting all of the constituents together on the same page. The actual business problems are almost never hard; it is all about leading change and getting all the leaders on the

same page. This is important to understand – getting the troops to follow “the new way” is easy, it is the mid- and upper-level managers whose participation you desperately need!

Providing an analogy to a corporate budget, Mark ran through an example of a reasonable breakout of time. At the end of it, it became clear that somewhere in the vicinity of 50% of our time should be spent in relationship-focused activities to remain a “customer service oriented value added service provider!” While this seems like a lot, it makes your probability of success soar.

Finally, why is it important? Mark discussed the observation that over the past few decades he has almost NEVER had a discussion (or argument) about delivery dates. He attributes this to his hard work at building trusted relationships – because once that relationship is established and maintained, those working with you know that you are already doing what needs to be done as quickly as possible. If there will be a delay, honor the trust in those relationships by clearly informing the appropriate people of a slippage and the impact, but it won’t devolve into an uncomfortable debate because of the investment you have already made.

To sum it up in Marks final words: “Business process improvement is change. In order to have change you have to lead it. In order to lead it, you must be a leader. Your decision making skills are much enhanced if you can see the problem from multiple perspectives, and to do that you need to listen, learn, and build trusted relationships.”

## Call for Suggestions on Articles and Presentations

We regularly seek articles and related information that would be of interest to our readers and members. If you have a suggestion for an article please let us know by sending an email to “newsletter@atlantaspin.com”. Or better yet, if you would like to contribute an article of interest to our group, please contact us at the same email address and let’s talk about it.

Each month, the Atlanta SPIN meetings and newsletters

strive to deliver real world practical approaches that can strengthen one’s abilities to succeed in the evolving and often challenging domain of software and systems development. Your feedback and ideas on the programs and supporting newsletter articles is vital and appreciated; it will help us to continue to deliver the valuable information you need for your personal career growth .We want to hear from you!

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<https://seir.sei.cmu.edu/seir/>, has over 30,000 registered users and is a forum used to contribute and exchange information about software engineering improvement activities, including CMMI.

**The CMMI Process Improvement Yahoo! discussion group**

[http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cmmi\\_process\\_improvement/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cmmi_process_improvement/) is a forum used to contribute and exchange ideas about CMMI-based improvement.

**BSCW Shared Workspace** <https://bscw.sei.cmu.edu/pub/bscw.cgi/0/79783> is a forum used to contribute and exchange CMMI-related materials.

Information courtesy of SEI Customer Relations. Find out more about SEI Membership online at  
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**About Atlanta SPIN, Incorporated**

[www.atlantaspin.org](http://www.atlantaspin.org)

The Atlanta SPIN organization was chartered in 1994. This group has been a force for software process improvement in the Atlanta area since then. The organization has a growing membership list that currently numbers 850+ members. The group typically meets every third Wednesday of the month. Our meetings typically attract audiences of 40 – 50 people. These meetings provide a forum for like-minded people, interested in learning from others and sharing their own experiences. There is time allowed before and after the meeting for networking among the participants, including a review from the audience of any job openings that are available. The Board, through its work with Sponsors, ensures that food and drinks are also available at no cost to the membership. Atlanta SPIN is a 501C3 non-profit corporation. Your contributions may be tax deductible and qualify for corporate matching contributions from your company.