

How to Know When a Process Is Broken (Even If It Looks Like It's Working)

Not all broken processes look broken. Some operate with near-perfect output on the surface: deadlines are met, customers are served, and reports are filed. But underneath that calm exterior, inefficiencies may be quietly piling up. Teams are overextending themselves, duplicating efforts, or constantly stepping in to fix the same issues—again and again. These “silent inefficiencies” produce hidden costs and bottlenecks that undermine performance, drain employee energy, and limit your capacity to grow or adapt.

So how do you know when a process that *looks* fine is actually broken?

1. The Same Problems Keep Reappearing

Recurring issues are a classic symptom of a broken process. If your teams are repeatedly fixing the same errors, responding to the same questions, or managing the same exceptions, it’s likely that the root problem has never been addressed. Harvard Business Review notes that organizations often “normalize” recurring problems, which masks the need for systemic change and stifles innovation.

2. You're Relying on "Hero Work"

When your best people are constantly stepping in to meet deadlines, fix gaps, or smooth over customer issues, your process is dependent on human effort, not system design. While it’s tempting to celebrate these “above and beyond” contributions, they usually indicate that the standard process isn't robust enough to deliver on its own. Gallup research has shown that over-reliance on high performers without process support leads directly to burnout and disengagement.

3. Approvals Are a Bottleneck

Approvals are meant to ensure alignment and accountability—but when they consistently slow things down, something’s off. Common signs of a dysfunctional approval process include:

- Approvals that are always granted, but only after days of delay
- Team members who can predict the outcome before the approval is even requested
- Work regularly stalling while waiting for signatures from leaders who aren’t adding value at that step

These are signs that your approval structure may need redesign—either by empowering teams to make more decisions or by clarifying roles and thresholds for sign-off.

4. Shadow Systems Are Doing the Real Work

If employees are keeping their own tracking tools—like side spreadsheets, Slack threads, or undocumented templates—it means the formal process or technology isn't meeting their needs. While these tools might “get the job done,” they introduce risk, fragment data, and create inconsistency across teams.

5. New Staff Can't Navigate the Process

If onboarding a new team member requires hours of informal explanation, workarounds, or “you'll just learn it on the job” moments, the process lacks clarity. A well-functioning system should be understandable, repeatable, and documented—so people can do their jobs confidently, not rely on institutional memory.

What to Do About It

Identifying broken processes isn't about blame—it's about visibility. Start by engaging your teams in conversations about where things feel clunky, slow, or frustrating. Map out what's really happening day to day, not just what's on paper. Pay attention to where people say “that's just how we do it,” or where a single person seems to hold everything together.

These are your signals for change.

By addressing silent inefficiencies before they become loud failures, you can reclaim time, reduce stress, and create smoother, more scalable ways of working. Because a process that looks like it's working—but only because your people are overextending themselves— isn't really working at all.

References:

Harvard Business Review (2019). Why Organizations Don't Learn from Repeated Mistakes

Gallup (2023). State of the Global Workplace Report