

Culture is a Key Foundation for Process Work

APQC's 2026 Process and Performance Management Priorities and Challenges [survey](#), conducted in November 2025, included 156 valid participants representing a diverse range of industries like services (13% of respondents), utility/energy organizations (9%), and software/technology organizations (9%).

APQC found that the top three focus areas for PPM in 2026 are:

- process management (94% of respondents),
- continuous improvement (89%), and
- data and measurement (76%).

Process management and continuous improvement remain the highest priority topic areas for PPM professionals in 2026, followed closely by data and measurement. But across this year's survey results, culture showed up repeatedly as an underlying force shaping many of the top priorities and challenges.

Whether organizations are striving to create a culture of continuous improvement, move from a function-based to a process-thinking mindset, standardize KPIs, or realize value from digital investments, cultural factors are central to success. As digital tools and AI capabilities expand across the enterprise, the need for a strong process foundation becomes even more critical. Culture is what enables that foundation to take hold. Throughout this article, we examine how culture influences the top PPM challenges and provide guidance for strengthening it in practical, sustainable ways.

Process Management

When it comes to process management as a focus area, respondents cited "defining and mapping end-to-end processes" as their top challenge (31% of respondents). Defining and mapping end-to-end processes remains the top process management challenge year over year. This persistence reflects ongoing efforts to break down functional silos and strengthen collaboration across the value chain. As organizations invest in digital technologies and automation designed to operate across workflows, clarity around end-to-end processes becomes increasingly important for driving customer-centric and performance-focused outcomes.

The second-ranked challenge—moving from a function-based to a process-thinking culture—has regained prominence after declining in 2024 and 2025. Shifting the focus from optimizing individual departments to improving how work flows across functions enables stronger alignment to enterprise objectives. A process-oriented mindset promotes shared accountability, cross-functional collaboration, and more consistent decision-making tied to business results.

Advancing this cultural shift requires simplifying process language and methods, empowering operational teams to manage and improve their own work, and reinforcing governance structures that clarify ownership. The goal is to transition from a model in which the process team "owns" process management to one in which the business integrates process thinking into daily operations. In this model, process management becomes less about documentation and more about enabling informed decisions, accelerating improvement, and strengthening accountability across the value stream.

Continuous Improvement

The top continuous improvement challenges are closely tied to culture. In 2026, respondents identified “creating a continuous improvement culture” (51%), “creating a systematic approach to identifying improvement opportunities” (46%), and “aligning continuous improvement efforts across the organization” (34% of respondents) as their most pressing concerns.

These results suggest that organizations are moving beyond isolated improvement projects and focusing instead on building sustainable, enterprise-wide capability. Aligning improvement efforts across functions helps prevent conflicting initiatives and ensures that local changes support broader strategic objectives. An end-to-end perspective enables organizations to understand interdependencies across workflows and evaluate how changes in one area may affect performance elsewhere.

Sustaining continuous improvement requires more than methodology; it requires engagement. When leaders, sponsors, and front-line employees lack clarity around purpose, ownership, or expected outcomes, improvement efforts often stall. Cultural barriers—such as limited sponsorship, unclear roles, or insufficient time and resources—can undermine even well-designed programs.

Leading organizations address these challenges by:

- reinforcing shared ownership,
- investing in skill development,
- aligning incentives with improvement goals, and
- maintaining consistent communication about both successes and lessons learned.

Over time, these practices help embed continuous improvement into daily work rather than treating it as a series of standalone initiatives.

Although developing a systematic approach to identifying improvement opportunities may appear process-driven, its effectiveness depends heavily on cultural readiness. Employees must understand how improvement connects to business outcomes and how their contributions influence results. In this way, establishing a culture that supports continuous improvement becomes foundational to building a disciplined, repeatable improvement capability.

Data and Measurement

Data and measurement remain foundational to process and performance management. Beyond benchmarking and identifying improvement opportunities, measures are intended to inform decisions, guide resource allocation, and reinforce accountability. However, survey results suggest that many organizations are still working to translate measurement into consistent action. Establishing a data-driven culture remains the top challenge in this focus area (44%), and respondents also point to difficulties aggregating analysis into dashboards that effectively support decision-making.

These findings indicate a broader shift from reporting performance to enabling decisions. Many organizations produce dashboards, but fewer design them to reduce noise, clarify priorities, and prompt action. When dashboards are built around the questions leaders and employees must answer—rather than around available data—they are more likely to improve decision quality and alignment.

Effective dashboards also provide context, not just results. For senior leaders, this means connecting performance trends to strategic objectives and business outcomes. For operational teams, it requires clarifying what current performance indicates, how measures are calculated, and which actions may influence results. Without this context, dashboards risk becoming passive reporting tools rather than instruments for improvement.

Finally, dashboard effectiveness depends on clear ownership and strong data governance. Organizations must define responsibility both for maintaining and evolving measures and for acting on performance shifts. Data owners play a critical role in ensuring reliability,

consistency, and accessibility across business units. Without standardized definitions and accountable ownership, dashboards can erode trust and limit their usefulness in decision-making.

Taken together, these challenges highlight the importance of moving from a reporting culture to a decision culture—one in which measures are not only visible but actively used to shape behavior, prioritize work, and drive enterprise performance.

Guidance for Shifting Your Culture

Shifting organizational culture requires sustained effort, particularly when changes affect long-standing behaviors, decision norms, and ways of working. However, research and practice show that organizations can evolve their cultures to better support new strategies, operating models, and digital capabilities. The following practices can help establish a structured approach to culture change.

1. **Engage influential leaders and employees.** Culture change gains momentum when senior leaders, respected managers, and long-tenured employees model the desired behaviors. Visible sponsorship and consistent reinforcement from influential stakeholders increase credibility and signal organizational commitment.
2. **Create space for cross-functional collaboration.** Cultural shifts, such as moving toward process thinking, require opportunities for teams to work across boundaries. Providing structured forums for collaboration and learning helps employees understand how new expectations translate into daily work.
3. **Establish consistent, two-way communication.** Culture change efforts are more sustainable when communication flows both downward and upward. Mechanisms that allow employees to ask questions, share feedback, and surface concerns help maintain engagement and reduce resistance.
4. **Align incentives and recognition with desired behaviors.** Performance goals, rewards, and recognition programs should reinforce the behaviors the organization seeks to encourage. For example, incentivizing cross-functional collaboration supports a shift toward enterprise process alignment.
5. **Monitor and reinforce progress over time.** Cultural change requires ongoing measurement and reinforcement. Regular review of behaviors, outcomes, and adoption signals helps prevent regression to previous norms and strengthens long-term sustainability.

Read More

For further insights related to PPM and organizational culture, be sure to see the following resources in APQC's resource library.

- [Building a Data-Driven Culture that Employees Can Actually Use](#)
- [Process Improvement: People and Culture](#)
- [Cultural Influencers: How to Shift and Sustain Organizational Culture](#)
- [The Role of PPM Professionals in Culture](#)
- [Getting Back on Track: Misalignments and Managing Culture](#)
- [Where Culture Goes Wrong](#)

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