

Revving Up Your Processes ... And Results

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I'll never forget the first time I heard a consultant say that the typical employee works less than 50 percent of the time effectively. I thought this person didn't have a clue about the reality of my work life. After all, everyone in my business worked long hours and was deeply committed to their job. The idea was an insult to hardworking people everywhere. I was shocked and angered.

It didn't take me long to find out, however, that the consultant was right about my cohorts and me. After years as an organizational effectiveness consultant, I have seen the truth of this statement demonstrated over and over again.

Imagine The Difference

Assume for the sake of argument, that the statement is true. How would getting just 10percent more effective action from each worker impact your organization? How would this impact your profitability, morale, customer service and other major indices? The impact would be equivalent to an extra 200 hours of work a year. A lot of value-added, proactive work could be done in that amount of time. A lot of headaches could be eliminated or avoided as well. The amount of time and effort you spend figuring out how to work more effectively will be quickly repaid. The most important step is to commit to the improvement.

Don't Take It Personally

The fact that the typical employee works less than 50 percent of the time effectively does not mean that the employee isn't working hard. Frequently, the employee is working very hard. In fact, in my opinion, there is a direct relationship between working hard and working effectively. Typically, the harder we work, the less effective we are.

There are many causes for this loss of effectiveness. Sometimes employees goof off (a natural, healthful, even helpful thing to do, if not taken to extremes). Sometimes

employees don't know what they are supposed to do or how to do it – either because of poor training or supervision. Often, their job has been poorly designed (or not designed at all) for productivity. Most frequently, it is the processes they have been asked to use that rob them of productivity.

When you are struggling with productivity, look first at your processes. You will find great waste there if you look carefully and objectively. Unfortunately, it is much easier to blame people and we spend a lot of otherwise useful time doing just that. Each second we spend placing blame is one that cannot use to craft a solution. It is much better to spend our time focusing on and fixing processes.

Eliminate Waste Where It Exists In Processes

The first process I ever reviewed dealt with filling out a vacation slip. I picked it because it was so simple. I thought it probably took my organization a couple of minutes to get the slip filled out and recorded. Imagine my surprise when I found out that the way we had the process set up, we were spending approximately 40 hours for each vacation request! I was so stunned by my initial findings that I asked an industrial engineer to review and correct them. I was even more surprised when the industrial engineer verified that my findings were correct. After thoughtful process redesign, I reduced this process to about 30 minutes.

There are many, many processes that steal time from your people. They grow slowly, often in response to some problem that needs to be fixed right now (meaning – without proper thought). One quick fix “band-aid” is placed over the last fix. Over time, you end up with a tall stack of band-aids but no real fix. Sensory adaptation sets in and the complexity you create becomes the norm. In time, you set up management committees to codify the complexity you've created and train employees to ensure that it is carried out in its full multi-part glory.

Meetings are another example of how our processes result in ineffectiveness. Meetings are the number one time thief in most organizations. Everyone in the organization knows that a lot of time is wasted in meetings; they complain about them all the time, but rarely does anyone take the time to fix the problem. Bad meetings are just normal. Waste is only normal if you allow it to be.

Take The First Step

Eliminating waste is really simple. First, pick a simple process that you use frequently and know well. Write down each step in the process. This is harder than

it may seem because most processes have “ghost steps” – things that happen so much by instinct that we don’t recognize they occur. Now go back and find all the times that work is handed off from one person to the other, all the delays inherent in the current process, all the ways the process can and does go wrong, all the procedures in place to fix the inevitable problems with the system, each time the process is inspected, etc. Each of these steps indicates places where opportunities to streamline and improve the process exist. Figure out how long it takes to complete the process from start to finish and the typical end results.

Figure Out What The Customer Wants

Next, figure out what you are trying to accomplish for the customer – not for the administrative groups, or for the owner – for the customer. What does the customer really want? This is your goal. Anything in a process that doesn’t help deliver this goal should be evaluated carefully.

Redesign And Testing

Working with a small group of folks, figure out the simplest way to get to your goal. Research why all of the current quick fixes got added. This will tell you about process needs and give you an opportunity to design appropriately for them. Design out delay, unnecessary reviews and approvals and other forms of waste.

After you’ve done the redesign, try the new design out. Note problems, research and fix them to ensure you are truly fixing the problems.

Revving up your processes is one of the most satisfying things you can do personally and professionally. It improves both business results and morale.

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