

THE STAMP

Rooting Out Redundancies

Working with one of our customers, I was engaged to facilitate a major revitalization of their business. This undertaking would include determining a fresh business focus, developing new products, streamlining processes, and renewing the skills and attitudes of the staff.

It immediately became apparent that everyone was very busy. The question, of course, was “*busy doing what?*”. People were expressing concerns about workload pressures and aggressively were promoting the notion that resources needed to be increased. I pushed back, by stating my belief that there had to be significant chunks of activity that were merely “*busy*” work and that if we could identify and jettison that stuff, then we would free up staff time for more important work. And here’s the story of *The Stamp*.

When chatting with the support staff regarding their work environment, I challenged them to identify activities that might be done differently or that they could stop doing altogether, with no negative impact on the business. Someone said, “Oh, you mean, like, *The Stamp*.”

This organization reviewed engineering designs, some of which could be up to 200 pages. As part of the review process, each page had to be stamped (and there are 4 copies). Judy had to wear a special glove and by the end of stamping 800 pages, her hand was about to fall off. My immediate reaction was that this was insane and that we would either get out of stamping or find a machine to do it. They stated that legal counsel had verified the need to do the stamping.

After the meeting, I came down to Judy’s desk to see *The Stamp*. Now this wasn’t a little rubber stamp, but rather it was a heavy thing, encased in a metal frame that rotated as it was pushed down. I could understand why her hand would ache.

I spoke with the President about *The Stamp* and his reaction was exactly the same as mine. I told him that I wanted to have some fun with legal counsel. I marched into Tom’s office and stated that I was here to talk about *The Stamp*. He didn’t seem to know what *The Stamp* was about, so I related the activity to him. He didn’t recall rendering a legal opinion on *The Stamp*.

“Tom, the President and I have reviewed *The Stamp* and we feel that *The Stamp*, by itself, is insufficient. We think that legal counsel should be initialing each page, too. In fact, we’re of the opinion that legal counsel really should be doing the actual stamping!”



Tom quickly agreed that *The Stamp* was a mindless activity and that if there, indeed, was a legal requirement for *The Stamp*, that it needed to be addressed in some other manner. He asked me to find out the history of *The Stamp*. I had Judy investigate the situation.

It appears that over 20 years ago the procedure for *The Stamp* was initiated. Engineering designs had to be taken apart to be micro-fiched and *The Stamp* was a means for ensuring that the pages didn't get out of order. So it had nothing to do with a legal requirement, although that was the common belief. It wasn't even document control. It was merely page numbering!

And the Judys of the world spent hundreds of hours a year for the last twenty years doing *The Stamp*! What a waste of precious resources. What demeaning (make) work for human beings. What a vacuum of management attention.

Over time, all organizations develop a variety of activities like *The Stamp*. Unless management is rigorous in systematically eradicating *The Stamp*, it will creep into the acceptable norm of the workplace. Procedures that do not add value are redundant and debilitating. They suck out vitality, rendering staff dispirited and mindless. Management needs to establish approaches to actively solicit process improvements from their staff. Only active listening and remedial action will doom *The Stamp*.

To do this, begin by describing the business, identifying all the elements and how they inter-relate. Then map out the **processes** that support the business functions. Critically question whether each of the processes is really necessary. Evaluate how the processes are implemented and challenge all features of the current regime. Get rid of redundant processes and re-design other processes. Keep an open mind to ways that technology might be used to create efficiencies and eliminate redundancies.

It's probably been a while since someone seriously re-visited how things are being done. Maybe now is a good time. A substantial process review will result in new systems that, in general, are at least 20% streamlined! It's worth the effort, don't you think? We can't legislate against stupidity, but it is management's responsibility to root out redundancies.

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