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Tackling the bureaucratic beast

1. First, make a list of your key deliverables – what moves your performance needle? Keep the list fairly short, to highlight the ‘critical few’ that are really, really important.
2. Until it becomes second nature, try and establish a protocol where you ask yourself how the next activity you’re about to do enhances key priorities. As far as possible, ditch or reprioritise those that don’t add significant value.
3. Monitor the meetings that you attend. Are they all necessary? For example, a briefing email could replace a one-way information meeting. Could meetings be more productive? Are they focussed, with an agenda, or are they simply unstructured talkfests?
4. Audit your reporting. Where do you or your people spend time reporting? How is that adding value to the key deliverables of your team or the organisation? What about the reports that you request of others? Do those reports progress the key deliverables or do they simply add drag for others?
5. Review any processes that seem to vacuum up valuable resources. Many may be warranted, but others may be redundant. Organisations generally aren’t good at pruning obsolete processes.

STOP OVER-FEEDING THE BEAST!

A living nightmare

Imagine for a moment you’re the captain of a ship. But, alas, it’s not a modern luxury liner. Instead, it’s a much smaller, rather rickety, leaky wooden sailing vessel. Nonetheless, it’s pretty much the standard of the day, so you just get on with your job of reaching your chartered destination. However, the voyage is not going too well. Despite charting a great course and putting the ship into good winds, the ship simply isn’t making the progress you expected. Frustrated, you leave the bridge and manage to review what’s happening without being noticed by your crew.

First up, you notice that not all the sails are deployed. The sail hoister, it turns out, is waiting for orders but his boss is in a meeting. This happens regularly and the sails are frequently rigged sub-optimally. Next, you can’t believe the ship is towing a lot of empty barrels, causing tremendous drag and markedly reducing speed. The ship’s carpenters use this process to recover timber – but never thought to consult anyone about their reclamation efforts. Finally, you find a couple of crew spending most of their time bailing out water from a few large leaks. It’s a waste of their time and the extra weight slows the ship. The ship’s store has plenty of tar for the repairs but, because the quartermaster is feuding with the maintenance officer, it’s not being released.

A sketch from Monty Python?

The vignette certainly borders on the edge of comedy and, thankfully, you’re not really the captain of that ship. But, are you facing similar organisational challenges as you work towards achieving your assigned goals?

Our recent Personal Influence at Work research study found that many people report delivering under serious pressure. In fact, almost half (47%) of the respondents say they cannot deliver without overextending or compromising on quality.

Unsurprisingly, differences surface when we apply a generational lens. 48% of the Under 35’s report facing this challenge, along with 53% of the 35-44 group and 41% of the 45+ group. Only 32% of a fairly large sub-group of the 35-44 group said they can deliver without compromising or overextending!

Many of the worst-off 35-44 grouping are middle managers. In our 2010 study of middle managers in Australia, we found they were facing significant pressures. This year’s research shows the problem has likely deepened, rather than abating. More people, at different levels also, are affected. The 45+ group comprised more senior managers (including C-Suite and Board). This group is likely to have greater experience in coping with pressures. Their seniority may also give them an enhanced sense of being in control of targets and resources.

Reducing the workload

We often comment on the increasing complexity of workplaces today. On one hand, this complexity actually gives rise to the interesting knowledge economy jobs that many of us do. It’s great when we’re able to solve a complex challenge for a client.

However, the shadow side of complexity is that it’s also crept into the internal workings of organisational life. Even mid-sized organisations incur heavy costs for being an organisation. As an example, many studies show that managers spend around 50% of their time in meetings. For senior management, this is as high as 80%. It’s an inordinate amount of time and little wonder that people are feeling pressured. Perhaps it’s time to reflect strategically on how elements of organisational complexity add value?

An ever-hungry beast

On closer reflection, organisations can become a bit like an ever-hungry beast. Many seem to allow organisational bureaucracy and politics to divert attention from the main game – delivering outcomes for clients. Let’s take a look at some of the chief culprits.

First, there are meetings. We’ve already seen that people spend massive amounts of time meeting. UGM’s filmed research of meetings shows they’re a critical component organisational work. But, like other studies, we found up to 60% of time in meetings is wasted. Even a 20% reduction in meeting time would unlock substantial resources to allocate more productively.

Next there are reports. A major problem today is information overload, yet many organisations continue to insist on copious reporting that seldom relates directly to organisational drivers of value. Reports that take days, even months, of staff time are hardly read and seldom remembered – there’s just no time. How is this different from having someone repaint a wall every day for no good reason?

And then there are bureaucratic processes. A typical case of the process tail wagging the dog is one company’s \$140 cost to requisition a \$5 box of pencils. How could processes with this kind of outcome ever be considered valuable? Seems more like empty barrels over the ship’s stern causing drag!

Stop over-feeding the beast

How hungry is your organisational beast? It’s likely that you and your people are under the pump to deliver. How much time could you claw back and divert to key activities in the value chain? You’ll never know unless you try. Why don’t you give it a go? Do an audit of ‘value-adding’ activities and act on your findings. You owe it to your well-being.