

As Little As Possible

At the recent Global Organization Design Society conference in Toronto a question popped up, "How much power should a staff function have?" The answer, "As little as possible." Not long after that I spoke to Charles Knight who was CEO of Emerson for 27 years. When I asked about the size of staff functions Knight said they should be "As little as possible." I had stumbled upon a theme.

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The comments from these organization design specialists and this very successful CEO were not criticisms of HR. These comments were about how an organization can best use staff functions—and they were talking about IT, legal, and public affairs not just HR.

The essential pillar of organization structure is made of workers who report to supervisors who report to managers and up a few levels to the CEO—what we call 'the line.' The staff functions sit off to the side of this central pillar and provide expertise to facilitate the line managers' work. (Henry Mintzberg's old but still excellent book *Structure in Fives* provides a nice way to understand organization structure).

So a question staff functions ought to ask line managers is, "Are we facilitating your work?" Ask that and I fear you would get a bewildered look. Most line managers feel the staff functions generate work, not facilitate it.

Most of this is just a matter of perception. When an HR manager tells a line manager that he or she must go through certain steps before they fire someone they are not creating work—they are saving that manager from potential legal action. When HR tells the manager to go

through a process to determine wage increases they are not creating work, they are creating a climate of fairness which will help head-off conflict.

However, when these processes are long and complicated then HR may be creating work rather than facilitating it. When HR imposes a team building program line management is perfectly right to question whether that is actually the very best use of their time. So it is important that HR approaches their role with the goal of creating as little work as possible for the line (for those firms with a sense of humour, HR can make their motto "we do as little as possible.")

At the organization design conference Anne Stephen from the Bank of Montreal described the problem as being about clutter. Many middle-class people in North America suffer from having too much stuff in their homes. In their kitchen they'll have a blender, coffee grinder, food processor, various sets of knives, fondue pot, two different types of coffee maker, a toaster, a toaster oven and it just goes on from there. It becomes clutter. Every item demands its own little bit of physical and mental space. Each item on its own has value,

but collectively they degrade the performance of the kitchen.

Line managers feel their life is very much like that. On top of all their regular work to deliver a product or service they have to do reports for finance, comply with directives from IT, respond to a memo from the legal department, and read the emails from public affairs. From HR they have training programs, diversity programs, compensation forms, benefits software, leadership guidelines and on and on. It's clutter and it degrades their performance.

HR departments would do well to make a commitment to their line that they will do everything possible to eliminate clutter. They can do this by thinking hard before they introduce new programs. They can do this by making programs optional—if the manager thinks it will facilitate their work they will participate, if they have higher priorities (like visiting a customer) they will not (and should not) participate.

HR can help reduce clutter by editing a 1,000 word report down to 500 words, by slimming a full-day of training into a half-day and cutting down a 4 page form into 2 pages. You can be sure the line managers will applaud when they see HR working hard to eliminate clutter and hence facilitate their work.

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