

Clearing the Organizational Clutter

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

I see a lot of “clutter” in organizations that has nothing to do with piles of paper or disorderly desks and offices. Organizational clutter can take many forms. See if any of these resonate with you:

- Layers of bureaucracy that stifle creativity and innovation
- Maze-like organizational structures created to avoid confronting unsatisfactory employee performance or dysfunctional workplace relationships
- Hierarchies that slow decision-making and obstruct efforts to serve customers well
- Disengaged employees who serve as a drag on productivity and profit
- Programs that drain resources and do not support organizational goals

Whatever form such clutter takes, the consequences are misalignment with organizational goals, and barriers to optimizing business results.

Organizations can be notorious pack rats. My observation is that many of them tend to grow by collecting layer upon layer of “things” – e.g., structures, processes – without reviewing what’s

in place and how well it’s working. This is especially true when organizations are growing rapidly and there seems to be no time for anything other than taking care of day-to-day operations. In other cases, people simply work around dysfunction by creating additional processes or structures. In doing so, they create misalignment with desired outcomes.

Recently an executive asked me to help re-structure his organization because he felt it was not serving its customers well. What quickly came to light was that as the department had grown, the structure was designed to work around employees whose performance was problematic. For example, because one person was so unpleasant, her colleagues developed an informal process that enabled them to by-pass her altogether. Not only did approval processes become more cumbersome, but communication across areas was severely hampered. In another instance, a manager refused to do the job for which he was paid, yet because his boss chose to turn a blind eye to his behavior, his peers picked up his slack because they didn’t want to disappoint their customers. Though their intention was admirable, they essentially were enabling his dysfunctional behavior and creating more hoops through which people had to jump to get things done. Still another manager didn’t trust her peers to maintain the necessary control over department resources, so she created a formal process that required her approval for even small projects and those outside her area of expertise. This unwieldy practice caused excessive delays, thus seriously eroding

customer service. Over the years, the organizational clutter had reached epic proportions, resulting in negative repercussions for employees as well as for customers. Collectively, the dysfunctions were like the proverbial elephant in the living room: everyone knew they were there, they were taking up all the room and sucking up all the resources while making everyone uncomfortable, yet no one acknowledged their presence or did anything to remove them.

Here are ten actions you can take to clear organizational clutter:

1. Gain clarity on your vision, values, and goals so the picture of the organization that employees have in their heads is the same as the picture in executives' heads.
2. Keep your goals front and center. When you are thinking about implementing new ideas or proposing new programs or re-directing resources, stop and ask yourself which goal(s) they support. If the reply is "none," do not go forward.
3. When you consider requests to add new things or people, ask what specific goal(s) the proposed additions support.
4. Review your organization structure. Does it still serve you well given the changes (e.g., increased size, technological advances) that have occurred? Will it serve the organization as it implements its strategy?
5. Evaluate employee performance honestly to ensure you have the right people in the right jobs.
6. Audit your processes to ensure they are necessary and that they are working as effectively as intended. If not, make the changes that enable them to reach the desired level of performance.
7. Stop building processes and organizational structures around dysfunctional people and reporting relationships.
8. Question assumptions rather than doing things just because they've always been done a certain way.
9. Ensure that employees are maximizing the time spent on value-added work. That is, they should have something to show for their efforts at the end of the day rather than coming up empty-handed because they engaged in non-productive "busy work."
10. Consider zero-based exercises – e.g., budgeting, staffing – that begin by taking a look at what is needed and utilizing only those resources that meet the needs. This is in contrast with most existing systems, which simply build on what is there without having to justify or even think about it. In these turbulent times when the only constant seems to be change, do we *really* need more of what we had the year before?

What steps will *you* take today to begin to clear the organizational clutter that is preventing you from maximizing business results? ➔

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