

Increasing Work Flow Productivity

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INTRODUCTION

As organizations grow in complexity the number of problems increases. Managers, naturally address and solve these problems by creating systems, policies, procedures, forms and informal work rules. In most cases, the overall system grows piecemeal and is not well coordinated or well understood. The result is a work flow that is usually inefficient and often ineffective.

The following steps outline a procedure for work flow analysis and improvement which is quite simple and extraordinarily effective in improving the coordination, communication and control between the different elements of an organization.

GUIDELINES FOR ANALYZING AND IMPROVING WORK FLOW

DESIGN

1. Create a first draft flowchart of how work flows through your organization. Although this can be done by a team, it is faster to have the least number of people involved in creating the first draft. If one person has a good grasp of the work flow, let that person create the chart. On the other hand, if you need an expert from sales operations and accounting, let each person create that part of the chart he or she knows best. If differences exist about how work does or should flow, do not try to resolve them at this point. Simply note them.
2. Identify all of the key people involved in the work flow. Using the basic guidelines of good teamwork, bring these people together to:
 - a) Identify any questions, additions, or disagreements about the first draft of the flowchart.
 - b) Facilitate discussions to clarify the chart and agree on it.
 - c) If there is potential for a fair amount of conflict about the flowchart, it is essential that the purpose of the organization be clearly spelled out and agreed to. This purpose then becomes the touch stone for making decisions and resolving conflicts about the flow of work. In other words, the work flow is designed in order to accomplish the purpose¹¹.
3. A flowchart must also show all forms and paperwork. The master flowchart should show where each form is created and to whom it is distributed.

¹ For more information, see Management Briefing #104, "Seven Characteristics of a Healthy Business."

Increasing Work Flow Productivity

4. The next step is to clarify the "passing rules." These spell out what must be completed by one person or one department before the work can be passed to the next department. It also spells out the expectations of the recipient.

Once again, it is necessary to facilitate a team discussion and problem-solving session to negotiate and clarify what the "passing rules" should be.

5. It is now time to set stretched standards for each critical part of the flowchart. Standards typically cover such areas as:
 - a) The turnaround time for each step of the flowchart.
 - b) The quality of each procedure in the flowchart.
 - c) Cost of each step, including scope, reward, labor, setup time.
 - d) How to locate work in progress without undue delay.
 - e) Additional standards which are appropriate for your type of work flow.

A stretched standard is one that stretches everyone to do better by a significant but not impossible amount.

IMPLEMENTATION

6. The completed flowchart plus paperwork plus "passing rules" and stretched standards should now be communicated to everyone in the organization. If the right key people have been involved in the creating of the chart and standards, then its implementation should be enthusiastically supported. If there is not enthusiastic implementation, then additional people should have been involved earlier in the process. It may now be necessary to back track and involve them at this point.
7. In order to receive full benefit from all the work done, it is now necessary to begin living by the flowchart and the stretch standards. Usually, this requires one or more teams of key individuals who engage in problem-solving on "how to" achieve the new standards.

Depending upon the size and complexity of the work flow, one problem-solving team might encompass the whole process or it may be necessary to have a series of problem-solving teams focusing on different parts of the work flow. If there are particular challenges as work moves from one area or department to another, teams should be composed which are cross-departmental.

8. It is often useful to assign one person to become "Keeper Of The Chart." The responsibilities of this person are:
 - a) To see that every person in the organization understands the flowchart.

Increasing Work Flow Productivity

- b) To ensure that the flowchart, paperwork and "passing rules" are realistic and being used.
- 9. The implementation process should be continuous. Do not be satisfied once you have reached your original stretched standards. As you begin to achieve them, it is appropriate to "up the ante" and stretch the standards even further.
- 10. If there are significant differences between the various perspectives on what the flowchart should look like, plus a climate of mistrust or finger pointing between various parts of the organization, it may be necessary to employ a skilled outside facilitator to lead you through this process.