

THE “PROFESSIONAL” ORGANIZATION

Meetings, Voice-Mail, E-Mail, and PowerPoint

Busy, busy, busy. Everyone laments how overworked and busy they are. Yet, when we examine how individuals and organizations spend their time, different truths begin to emerge. There is incredible wastage occurring with constant regularity that could be reversed quite readily, if we commit to becoming “Professional” organizations.

The culture of an organization may be understood as the collective behaviour of its employees. Culture is not something that is written down, although some organizations attempt to capture aspects of their *desired* culture by identifying key values. An organization’s culture, however, is the result of the accepted norms, wherein the community of employees tacitly colludes to behave in particular ways. Some behaviours may be beneficial to the organization and its employees, whereas others clearly are not.

For instance, many organizations exhibit a lack of discipline related to meetings. In effect, the employees, individually and collectively, are condoning this behaviour. It becomes an inherent organizational trait that meetings never start on time, are unfocused, consume unreasonable chunks of time and energy, and do not deliver the desired results. In effect, one can produce the Minutes **prior to** the meeting, because much like the movie “*Groundhog Day*”, the organization is just replaying previous meetings. When the biggest accomplishment of the meeting is setting the date for the next meeting, then we know that something is terribly wrong.

Although everyone will express their frustration with unproductive meetings, they mindlessly continue to act out that behaviour. Everyone needs to reflect on how the organization is performing and *think* about what the *desired* behaviour would look like. What is required to change things is to identify and acknowledge the undesired behaviour, and then exercise collective discipline to change the organizational behaviour. Valuable time can be re-gained and that annoying frustration will be reduced.

How are the telephone and voice-mail being used or misused?

Imagine trying to pursue a customer and attempting to contact someone who never answers her telephone directly. All calls go to her voice-mail and it is her practice to return messages, on a very selective basis. This represents a total lack of professionalism and personal courtesy. The telephone is a tool, not a barrier to hide behind.



Using voice-mail to screen calls, quite simply, is not acceptable behaviour or business practice. When you leave a message, you expect and appreciate a return call – even if the answer is “no”. Unbeknownst, unreturned messages are causing you hidden stress. All messages should be returned and within twenty-four hours. Executives and other professionals consistently abide by this rule.

We send and receive messages all the time – sometimes consciously, sometimes not. Have you ever encountered someone who answers the telephone every time it rings and then says, “Sorry. I can’t talk to you now, I’m in a meeting.” What just happened and what messages are being sent?

He’s holding a meeting in his office and the telephone rings. By answering it, he disrupts the flow of the meeting and signals to everyone that the call is more important than the meeting. Then he signals to you that the meeting really is more important than the call. At this point, he’s upset everyone and has to struggle to get the meeting back on track. Using voice-mail, in that situation, would have been much more appropriate.

Call someone on a Tuesday and get a message that says “Hi. It’s Bob. I’ll be out of the office Thursday morning, returning in the afternoon. Please leave a message and I’ll get right back to you.” Obviously, Bob has failed to update his message for several days. Keep your message current and succinct. We don’t need to know the details of your work schedule, just when you’ll be returning. Again, this is a sign of professionalism, and it also helps you manage your caller’s expectations.

E-Mail is a wonderful tool, when used properly. Unfortunately, the ease of the technology has bred thoughtless and productivity-robbing behaviour. A manufacturer, with facilities spread across North America, has someone leaving head office. He sent an e-mail, saying “I’ll be out of the office for the next three days.” It was sent by “Copy All”. Thousands of employees received the e-mail; most of whom didn’t even know the person. Try calculating the cost to the organization just having all those employees open and delete that e-mail.

Many organizations have policies regarding e-mail etiquette and protocols. Nothing, however, replaces the diligent employee who thoughtfully considers who *needs to know* something, as opposed to *nice to know*. If one had to hand-write every e-mail message individually to all the recipients that currently are on a distribution list, the amount of electronic traffic would be severely curtailed. In a *Professional* organization, employees consider the consequences and costs of their actions.

PowerPoint was intended to be a presentation **tool**. It has morphed into something quite different. In many instances, it almost has replaced the *thing* that it’s supposed to be presenting.



“That was a great PowerPoint presentation, Pat.” “Thanks, I worked on it for an entire week.” So, instead of developing the new product, service or whatever, a week was dedicated to developing the presentation. At its extreme, organizations accept the PowerPoint presentation as a reasonable substitution. Keep presentations simple and do not distort reality.

All of these situations, among similar behaviours, deplete the resources of organizations and result in unproductive time being wasted by employees. In the *Professional* organization, employees have discontinued these practices and have become more productive, less stressed and much less busy, busy, busy. It’s time to make your contribution and influence your organization to become a truly *“Professional”* organization.

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