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Getting Things in Order

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O-R-D-E-R up!

Last month we took a shot at helping people reduce the uncertainties in their lives. We called it “[Concentrating on Concentration](#).” Well, in all humility, it was a minor hit. Consider that article to be the first in a three-part series. This month we will focus on “order,” while next month we’ll share some thoughts on customer interaction.

These three topics are related to an important overall process of building potential – in yourself and your organization. Our perspective is that, like an athlete in training, you have to build up your potential (wind up the spring, as it were) before you go charging off into the wild blue yonder. “[Concentrating on Concentration](#)” was about getting the waste out of your business processes: focus down on what’s really important from your customer’s point of view, and stop doing dumb stuff.

What’s next? **Order**. Once you’ve got all the crap out of the way you have to get your stuff together (there are other metaphors we could use, but we like to think this *is* a family-friendly newsletter).

“Order” is a take-off from the old Quality movement (see “[Where is the Quality Movement Heading?](#)” by Brenda Fisk of [Business Improvement Architects](#)). Eliminate the variances in your processes – no extraneous garbage. You have to work out just what is the exact sequence of events you need to go through to get the right product in front of your customer at the right time and in the right way. And it has to be repeatable! You make money when you minimize the effort (and material) needed to produce a consistent product or service, over time, all the time.

Why do mechanics stock parts? After all, it costs money to buy things you don’t need right away. They do it so that when they do need a “fanorten” valve, it’s right there. They don’t have to run around looking for it or wait two weeks (or months) for it to arrive. Why do chefs use menus? Because it focuses (and limits) your choices. And they have half the prep work already done on **standardized** products. Service is also quicker and more uniform. Can you imagine a restaurant where each meal involved an individual negotiation? Chaos! We’ll bet they don’t even do that on Air Force One.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, so what? Let’s work through an example in the workplace. Assume your goal is to provide a maximum amount of flexibility in workplace design (we actually prefer the bigger word “environment,” but for now we’ll stick to “workplace”). How do you instill order, or a defined, repeatable process with minimal variance to that design and construction activity?

First you go back to the idea of a menu. You develop scenarios and plans within a general framework and stick to those limitations. No we don't do sushi here – down the street for that, bubba.

Then you work backwards to “Okay, if they need X, then we need to A,B, and C.” Take a really simple example: a chair, a table and a laptop computer. Deliver the table first, then the chair, then the laptop.

How we doing so far? Making sense? The next step is to develop a “playbook,” or a prescribed series of activities, that gets you where you want to go in any particular situation. Define exactly what happens first, second, third, and so on. When the waiter hollers “Blue Plate Special” to the kitchen the chefs know exactly what to do. The things that take the longest to cook are started first and the fancy garnishes go on the plate last.

You have put some order in the final set of outputs; standardize the sequence of events to produce what you need, and the way you stock away the ingredients you will need. We've got one client who used this process to cut the workplace provisioning process down from 38 steps to 14 and reduced the cost by 38%. They can run the whole process to design or redesign a teamwork workplace in less than 48 hours! Think about what that could do for your business if that kind of orderliness was driven through the entire enterprise.

Our core message is simple: anticipate what you'll need to do and have to achieve your goal, get everyone on the same page, and practice, practice, practice. You don't want to be inventing new plays in the last two minutes of the Super Bowl (and you can bet winning football teams don't do that either). You want everyone to feel “been there, done that” even when it's the first time.

Who does this kind of thing right? The prime example is the military. They have contingency plans for **everything**. They have parts, pieces, and people stockpiled all over the place. Give 'em a target and bang, boom, zap, zing – it's invaded, conquered, and paved over before you know it.

But what about the opposite? When it doesn't work we really, really know it was hosed up. Duh, can you say “Katrina”? Technically we call this lack of orderliness “solipsism”. Go ahead and Google it (“[solipsism](#)”). It's a (patently false) belief that you are the only reality that exists. “Heck of a job, Brownie” - you know what you're doing. Enough said?

Notice that there is one very subtle thing here that is often lacking in business. Orderliness requires a serious degree of foresight and anticipation. It requires the development of contingencies and – hold on, help us here, **planning**. If “A” happens then we zig; if it's “B” then we zag. If you zig when you should have zagged you're dead. Just ask that rabbit that didn't make it across the highway.

Here's one more example of orderliness. Let's go back to our workplace example again. The first step in the order is to clearly understand very clearly what the purpose of the activity is. In the case of workplace design and provisioning the purpose of the process is to enable a person or team to work productively.

Why do people need tables, chairs and laptops? Once you understand that the next step is to decide what the output will be. What will it look like, including a range of options? When you can answer those questions, and only then, you execute the procedures needed.

Lastly, there is having the capability and the resources you need to have sitting in the background. In this case it's a stockpile of parts that can be assembled into that workplace (or some other variation of what you've offered on that menu).

Now we have an ordered sequence:

1. Purpose
2. Product
3. Process
4. Capability

Do you notice another subtlety here? This sequence of events is **not** the way things actually get done, is it? Rather, it's the way we *plan* to do things. When you actually execute you do it 4-3-2-1 – the opposite sequence! So we'll close this month with a re-statement of the obvious. You have to have orderliness in planning **before** you can create orderliness in execution.

So there you have it. Last month we gave you some ideas and ways to concentrate your business operations. This month we've talked about putting order into what is left of your process. Next month we'll shift to how to interact with your customers once you have got everything concentrated and in order...

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