How to eliminate mundane steps that hurt operations

Companies must allow autonomy, boost flow of relevant information and promote conflict resolution

**BUSINESS TALK**

**SCOTT BELLows**

Ms Chebet braved her morning commute to arrive at her parastatal on the outskirts of the Nairobi Central Business District. She arrived energetic and ready to face her day. However, by 10am, she needed to print a document in preparation for a later afternoon meeting. While printing, her department-allocated paper ran out. She then inquired from colleagues about where to obtain more printing paper.

The answers Ms Chebet received ranged from comical to insane. First, she needed to draft a two-page requisition justifying why she needed more paper. Since she had no paper, a colleague printed her typed up justification. Then, Ms Chebet obtained her immediate supervisors approval on the requisition. The request proceeded to the departmental manager who proposed several changes. After making the changes, Ms Chebet then resubmitted it to her supervisor for re-approval and then to the manager. Her requisition then reached the finance team then to purchasing then to logistics officers. Ms Chebet missed her meeting. She got the papers two weeks later. Frustrated, Chebet posted her CV online to look for another job.

Do you ever burn with frustration from intense operational constraints in your office? Do you sometimes feel that even obtaining a property mortgage is actually easier than pushing through simple processes at your firm? How much time do you waste each day on bureaucracy? Have you ever switched jobs over frustration from field constraints?

Today Business Talk embarks on a new series showcasing organisational development. A simple definition of organisational development involves enabling entities to solve problems and achieve goals. The discipline achieves objectives through expanding the knowledge and effectiveness of people and affecting organisational change.

Clearly, the parastatal where Ms Chebet worked urgently needs organisational development to institute change. An organisational behaviour expert would come in and assess the degree of organisation within the firm. The degree of organisation entails the extent of entity policies and procedures existent in the institution.

Research shows that organisations pass through three phases on their way to large dominant status. First, a firm or NGO begins as a grassroots effort. Perhaps a group of women in a village outside Karatina desires come together and find a solution for lack of clean water. They pool resources and bring water onto their farms.

Later, the women expand and supply water to neighbouring villages. They develop processes and procedures from everything including client acquisition to collection of water usage fees. The women also begin to hire professionals to run the business instead of their initial community committee.

Finally, the water company might serve an entire county. The large scale hints that the organisation now operates in the institutional phase of growth.

How might you identify whether your firm operates in an over-organised environment? Look for signs of highly mechanistic processes. To perform tasks, must you follow a procedure that seems to go against natural organic flows? If so, your firm prefers mechanistic approaches.

Next, like in Ms Chebet’s example, does your firm’s bureaucracy defy logic and create too many levels of approval that hinder your accomplishing tasks quickly and efficiently? Is a way to prevent corruption, theft, or simply as a way to control employees, firms often implement rigid and overly defined structures, leadership styles, job designs, and policies.

Over-organised situations lead to lower organisational performance by decreasing employee motivation.

The Harvard Business Review in 2007 named a large international NGO with substantial operations in Kenya as “the most complicated organisation in the world.” Fix over-organised situations by loosening constraints on behaviour. Change leadership, structures, approval thresholds, and job designs in order to liberate suppressed energy. Allow autonomy and flexibility. Increase the flow of relevant information between employees and management and finally promote effective conflict resolution within the firm.

Conversely, many organisations survive in the opposite situation: under-organised. Does your firm maintain too few constraints or only some regulations for effective task management? Is it unclear who should really conduct each task? Each time a new issue arises, do endless meetings ensue to decide on approaches? Poorly defined processes and failures to direct task behaviours effectively originate from immature or apathetic leadership, poor structures, or under-defined job designs. Startup for-profit companies and NGOs in the grassroots phase of growth often suffer from under-organised environments.

Interestingly, like over-organised situations, the under-organised lead to lower staff motivation, chaos, and ineffective time wastage that lowers profits. Even established firms may suffer from under-organised scenarios through various problem-prone areas such as product development, project management, and community development.

Resolve under-organised operations by introducing increasing levels of organisational processes, but within reason. Clarify the leadership roles for your managers. Ensure you structure communication between managers and employees. Begin specifying job duties for all employees of the firm whereby you also delineate departmental responsibilities.

Share your horror stories or over-organised insanity or under-organised chaos in your companies at #KenyaEconomics on Twitter. Prof Scott is the director of the New Economy Venture Accelerator (NEVA) at USIU’s Chandaria School of Business and Colorado State University.

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Workers at an EPZ factory in Athi River, near Nairobi. A culture of poor organisation leads to talent flight when workers are frustrated by bureaucracy and unnecessary checks and supervision.