

Finding More Time

Dehassling Your Company

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Like the classic movie “Ground Hog Day,” many employees experience work as one recurring nightmare after another – same old stuff, just a different day! And recurrent mistakes and problems eat up over 40% of your people’s time and effort – time better spent proactively selling and servicing customers – not to mention what it does to morale. Like water on a rock, these ongoing hassles eventually wear you and your people down.

As you prepare for summer, it’s time to clean your company’s proverbial hallway closets and garages. It’s time to find everyone an extra four to eight hours of productive time each week as a way to ease the burden of upcoming summer vacations and staff shortages. It’s time to “dehassle” the organization.

Hassle Logs

Nothing works better and faster than giving every employee a piece of paper and asking them over the next two weeks to “note every time they spend a minute or more doing something that shouldn’t have to be done, should have been done right the first time, is too hard to do, and/or is generally a frustration in doing their job.” And have them pay special attention to situations that also hassle customers including recurring questions, concerns, issues, and problems.

The first time I saw this executed there was a whopping 1784 instances logged by just over 200 employees. And this company was considered to be one of the best performing companies in their industry! Items included the perennial favorite “we need a bigger waste basket in the women’s restroom” to hundreds that pointed to some challenges with a specific order entry system (it’s not unusual to see a number of hassles related to the IT systems of the company).

One at a Time

The first step is to pick a few easy issues you can resolve immediately, like the waste basket issue. Another classic group of hassles revolve around a poorly designed form. One recent client had inadvertently left off a place for customers to put their email address on an order form, not allowing them to email a confirmation of the order. This, in turn, resulted in a rash of calls to the staff that didn’t need to occur. Obviously, this was an easy fix, but no one had had the time to stop and consider the problem – everyone was literally too busy answering calls!

It's also important to pick a couple big issues and let the staff know a team will be assigned to resolve each issue. This same client with the form problem also identified a significant production scheduling issue that was creating a huge ripple effect of hassles throughout the organization. The executive team assigned a team of four to revise the process within a week.

Summarizing Away

In the process of fixing these problems, it's critical that you publish the entire list for everyone to see – in its raw form. Resist the temptation to group the hassles into common categories and only publish the summary of those categories. Your people are going to be looking to see if their own specific hassles are on the list and they don't want to feel like they have been summarized away. The only exception to publishing all the hassles is if any represent a direct attack on an individual. These need to be culled from the list and handled privately.

You also need to emphasize that all the hassles can't be addressed immediately. Explain how you arrived at a prioritization of the list and share openly the criteria you used. One company was short of cash and needed to focus on those hassles that didn't require a great deal of money to fix. Another firm needed to focus on those hassles impeding sales activity. Whatever your criteria, make it transparent to your employees.

Easing the Burden

The first reaction from many executives when this process is suggested is that they don't need another "to do" list of activities – that there is already too much on their plate. And great leaders know it's better not to start something than to go at it half-heartedly. Nothing will kill this process and create ill feelings faster than to fail on executing fixes to the various problems. It's a quick way to turn enthusiasm into cynicism.

The key is to identify three to five middle managers or supervisors willing to form a team to administer this process. There's no better training you could give your up and coming leaders within the firm than gathering, learning, and working through the solutions to these hassles. Besides, they are one layer closer to the problems and should have better data and insight into the solutions. Assign one top executive to champion the process and to provide a link between the middle management team and the senior leadership.

Finding Time

The time and frustration saved by eliminating hassles is enormous. And it's a process you can do a couple times a year to keep the organization running smoothly. More importantly, de-hassling the company on a regular basis is a better alternative than simply throwing people at the mountain of work created by these hassles. Clean house and make everyone's day a little better.