

## Do You Have a High Intensity Bureaucracy?

Bureaucracies are not necessarily bad. They are designed to slow decisions down and create an environment where careful consideration is more important than fast action. This makes them ideal for most governmental organizations, utilities and monopolies. But it is not the best design for service companies -- although you could probably find a department or two within many companies that could benefit from slowing down and doing things more carefully.

Despite this, it isn't hard to find companies that have become bureaucracies or at least have a bureaucratic culture. Rarely has this happened intentionally. These are accidental bureaucracies. They just seem to evolve, almost always because of internal causes. They are also difficult to recognize and change because most are disguised behind a veil of relentless activity. Everyone is busy, but they tend to be doing the wrong things; things that are important to the individuals but not things that contribute to the business results of the company. A bureaucracy with a lot of energy and activity is a bad combination.

It reminds me of a conversation I had with the CEO of one of our client companies several years ago. I asked him to describe the strengths and weaknesses of one of his direct reports. He looked me straight in the eye and without a smile said: "His main weakness is that he's incompetent. His strength is that he's lazy." He understood that it is better to have minimal energy if someone is going in the wrong direction.

It is easy to be mesmerized by time-consuming activity and miss the fact that a company's underlying organization structure, processes and culture are not focusing employees on helping the company attain its core business goals. Fortunately, there are signs or clues that will help you identify when things are not working. Once you see these and understand the need to change, the actual changes you will need to make are relatively easy to identify. The difficulty is in convincing everyone to change how they behave because, in most cases, the new way of doing things is more difficult than what they are used to doing.

The key is to look past the fact that everyone is busy and pay attention to what they are actually accomplishing. Here are some specific activities and situations to look for -- these are the sure signs you have a problem:

- Too many meetings and too many people in the meetings. A meeting should have a specific purpose and should include only those people that need to be there. It should only last until the reason for having the meeting has been accomplished. Well run meetings are a necessary evil. They efficiently bring together key people to share information and make decisions but they also take everyone away from their main jobs. They are most effective when they are kept short and small.

Meetings tend to get out of control when individual and social needs become more important than what is best for the company. For example, meetings are great places to be seen, showcase ideas and impress peers and superiors. Attending some meetings also helps demonstrate that you are important, belong to certain "in-groups" and have attained a desirable level of status. Being invited to certain meetings can sometimes be seen as a substitute for actually accomplishing something. It's an easy way to get recognition and to reaffirm your importance.

Also, meetings are a nice, easy way to spend time -- a relaxing break in an otherwise hectic day.

- Everyone is so busy there is little or no time to do anything important. Everyone is scheduled out for weeks. Changing schedules is an overwhelming task. (There are so many people to call, rooms to reserve and so many other schedules to change that the task becomes more work than it is worth.) This is especially true when scheduling is the primary task of assistants.

You know you're in a bureaucracy when two things happen. First, you ask someone for some time to discuss an idea and he or she says, "Yes, I'd like to do that. Talk to my assistant and have him set up a time." Then when you talk to the assistant he says, "Great, were a little busy this month. The first opening looks like it will be . . . ."

Spending your time wisely, so you can have the biggest impact on your department's and company's results, is one of the most important tasks for every manager, professional and executive. Don't delegate who and when you talk to people. Prioritize your own time. And when you take control of your time do not forget to set aside a specific amount of time each day for yourself, to think about those things that interest you. This one action can help you keep control even when things get hectic. It may be the most valuable use of your time all day.

- There is a culture of consensus management. Everyone must agree before you can move ahead. People are afraid of making decisions and taking the lead (probably for good reason). Ideas are studied to death. Nothing of any significance or importance is accomplished unless everyone agrees or the idea has the strong sponsorship of a top executive.

A culture of consensus management shifts the balance of power from those who want to take action and get things done to those who are cautious (and especially those who are concerned about how change might affect them personally). It shifts the inertia in a company from action to inaction. It gives the power to anyone who dislikes change, instead of those who have great ideas and want to move ahead.

- Little or no accountability infrastructure. Lack of accountability is the primary cause of a bureaucratic culture. When a company does not focus everyone on attaining core business results, employees will acquire habits that instead focus them on satisfying personal and social goals. To keep this from happening you need real, practical, complete success measures at every level in the company and a managed process that holds people accountable for attaining results, including rewards for exceeding their goals.

These measures need to be balanced. They need to cover the full spectrum of responsibilities – quality, customer satisfaction, expenses, revenue, profit, etc. They also must be concrete and quantified. All measures must include numeric goals. For example, reducing expenses by 10% is better than "emphasizing efficiency" or keeping expenses within budget.

The most common error in setting goals or success measures is to have too many. The number may be debatable, but we believe more than 10 or 12 will blur your focus and dilute your intensity.

We suggest that every company step back and look at itself to see if you have or might be developing a bureaucratic culture. If either is true, you have a fundamental problem that must be fixed. Don't let the amount of activity in a company fool you into believing you have a well designed company. Instead, look at the effectiveness of what is being done.

We can help you by reviewing what you are doing and suggesting improvements. We have been helping companies get outstanding results for over 15 years. Please visit our website at [McDonald-ConsultingGroup.com](http://McDonald-ConsultingGroup.com), where you will find further explanations of these ideas (and other exciting ideas) in our Concepts and Ideas section.