

# The Pursuit of Efficiency

**F**or several years, public agencies have been caught in a double bind: their budgets are being cut, and they are under increasing pressure to provide more and better services. The typical response is to cut programs and people, but there is a better way.

Public agencies often are treated like the horse of a farmer who was advised that if he put 10 percent sawdust in his horse's oats, he could save on his feed bill. Because the horse did not seem to mind, the farmer continued to increase the percentage of sawdust in the feed until it was 80 percent. The farmer was saving a lot of money on his feed; the horse continued to perform, albeit less ably, but what the heck. The farmer began to think about what he could do with the money he was not spending on feed. Then one day the horse died.

So it is when more work without proper funding is stacked upon any organization. The ill effects are not outwardly obvious. One day, however, the horse will die: the agency will give poor service, make errors, or fail in any of the countless ways in which operations do fail when they are poorly sustained.

## **A Case Study**

For years, the office of the clerk of courts in Polk County, Florida, had operated well enough, generally receiving a

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**Gary English**

modest increase in funds each year to meet the gradual increase in business. Then, in 1988, the workload began to grow from a comfortable stream into a roaring river emanating from the rapid growth of the county and from a rising level of litigation. The city of Lakeland alone increased its traffic citations fourfold in one year. In a city of 72,000 people, the police department wrote 36,000 citations in one year.

It was a problem that every public agency in the country is facing—an increased workload but a growing reluctance by taxpayers to provide revenues. The only answer was to find ways to improve operating efficiency, to get more work from available resources. The clerk's office added staff and computers and moved into a spacious new county courthouse. Still, the work nearly overwhelmed the staff, and such problems as staff turnover began to surface, making the situation even worse.

Karl Marx is not ordinarily considered a management guru, but he did have one idea that managers should heed. He noted that after a while, quantitative changes become qualitative changes. Things do not just become "more," they become different. In Polk County, it became clear to Chief Deputy Clerk Richard Weiss that the solution to the problem was not to do more of the same but to do something different to find a better way to operate.

### **The Growth of "Adhocracy"**

The basic problem of the clerk's office was the same as for most organizations that have grown piecemeal over the years. As each new operation was added to the clerk's office, it was placed where the organization could best accommodate it at the time. Each time, there was some thought that, someday, the operation would be reviewed and everything would be straightened out. The press of work never allowed that to happen, and

the ad hoc solutions became routine and institutionalized.

This process, over time, moves an organization away from neat rationality into a hodgepodge of "making do," with decisions being made on the spot based upon immediate conditions. Temporary measures tend to become routine, and the more routine an activity is, the less likely it is to be scrutinized. Clear and evident problems are dealt with in an immediate fashion, but the system that caused it is not disturbed.

Eventually, the organization becomes a host of countless inefficiencies that are unseen, routine, part of someone's turf, and perhaps the only proper way of doing things. The operation is no longer a rational one, that is, an array of logical and reasonable measures to further the organization's goals. It becomes a mass of habitualized, once-temporary measures—a grossly inefficient "adhocracy." As public managers seek to keep their operations from getting out of hand, regulators and checkers are added, with the requirement that procedures be followed strictly. The result, as everyone knows, is self-binding bureaucracy.

Cutting programs does not in itself improve public management. The offering of programs and services is an entirely different question from that of managerial quality. Staff reductions generally affect the management of programs and administration, but, again, reductions do not necessarily bring improvement. The only way to improve management is to untie the knot of bureaucracy.

### **Untying the Knot**

I had been working with the clerk's office and a management committee composed of the chief deputy clerk, the human resources director, and the internal auditor to revise the performance evaluation system. As we discussed the larger problem of organizational development, it became

clear that the performance auditing process was an effective tool in cleaning up operational inefficiencies, inadequacies, and errors. The problem that was not being solved was how to use a performance auditing strategy for an entire organization.

The answer: managers and employees should audit themselves. There are, of course, occasions on which self-auditing would be a bad idea. For finding operational efficiencies, however, it had great promise. For one thing, most of the staff held a reservoir of ideas for improving work. Ordinarily, such ideas are not used and eventually are no longer offered. Second, the only true way to achieve efficiencies is to do so where the actual work is done, not in management councils. And finally, employee-authored improvements do not have to be sold to employees. Ideas that do not require management support or approval are generally made on the spot, so that when an improvement is reported, it is a *fait accompli*.

### **A Combined Approach**

The Organizational Performance Tracking and Improvement Method (OPTIM) is the merging of two professional approaches—organizational development and its training component—with auditing. Performance auditing consists of asking questions about what an individual or an office is supposed to be doing and what it is actually doing. The intent is to ensure that departmental responsibilities are being met properly and efficiently and that resource availability and use are commensurate with the need. Organizational development means benefiting from the improved focus and enhanced energies of a staff and system properly employed.

Polk County staff received preparatory training for the self-audit, which incorporated the beliefs that people can change their environ-

ments for the better if they choose to and that one should constantly be on the alert for ways to improve. OPTIM is presented as a no-fault process whereby people are not taken to task for existing problems but are recognized and praised for any improvements they can make. A person is not viewed as a converted sinner but as an alert and innovative manager or staff member. This condition is established for two reasons: candid discussions about problems are required for the initial review, and the process teaches employees how to review and improve their operations on a continual basis. Candid assessments continue to be a prerequisite for improvement.

### **Organizing and Setting Standards**

The first steps in OPTIM are to organize the work and to establish the criteria of success. These steps allow managers and supervisors, working in departmental groups, to identify and inventory all typical activities for which they are responsible and to organize them into related areas. Ordinarily, this organization of activities would be reflected by the organization of people. Conceivably, each department area would have its own technical supervisor. As the managers and supervisors discuss the question of work organization, they may differ in their understanding of work expectations. Sometimes, these differences are so profound that a separate process must be set up to resolve them.

Having agreed to the general organization of work responsibilities for each manager and supervisor, a department determines the criteria by which such work should be judged. They also are asked to rank the importance of these criteria. For example, is accuracy important, and if so, is it more important than speed?

If the process were to conclude at this point, the organization already would have benefited greatly. The staff would have:

- Inventoried its work activities,
- Organized and agreed upon its general work,
- Established performance criteria,
- Negotiated these criteria with their input and output ideas,
- Measured the level of performance of the department, and
- Improved communications and morale.

The Polk County staff now was properly focused and psychologically prepared to analyze and assess its own processes.

### **"No-Poof" Process**

The process is simple enough but is not always easy. One introduces work into the system and verbally tracks it through, step by step, until it is delivered to the customer. The steps always are worded in the active mode rather than the passive: "the counter clerk takes the completed form from the box labeled misdemeanors," instead of "the completed form is received by the misdemeanor department." The idea is to get all the magic, or "poof," out of the process so that nothing just happens; someone *does* it. This leaves no responsibility gaps in the performance track.

Here is an example of initial tracking and of the process revision that resulted from a review of an existing process. The total process of issuing a notice to appear for delinquent child support payments in Polk County originally involved 28 discrete steps. The revised process now involves 13. The department found that it was doing work that had been made unnecessary by another information system and that it also was doing some work that was not legally within its charge. Just within this small part of the overall operation, the department was able to save 2.5 staff-years of work within the department and one staff-year of a deputy sheriff's time. In addition, the department eliminated the need for six filing cabinets of material.

The office also found that it could computerize tax deed applications

and reduce that one-hour process to 15 minutes. Error was reduced significantly. In one office, the counter clerk, the clerk's supervisor, and the department head had different versions of proper procedures; standardizing the procedures relieved much confusion, error, and hard feelings. The accounting department established a procedure for employee annual reviews that enabled a new staff person to do it without supervision. Departments began to write job descriptions with percentages of time allocated to tasks and criteria established for performance.

The clerk's office found that it was making empirically based organizational adjustments, delegation and empowerment decisions, and staffing, training, and equipment needs assessment. One department determined that with an additional computer system and two part-time employees, enough overtime could be eliminated to provide a one-year payback on the equipment: a one-time increase in funds meant a long-term reduction. The final product of the review process was a comprehensive manual for the entire operation.

### **Outcome and Outlook**

The new Polk County courthouse is famous for its "sick building" syndrome, but until everyone was forced to evacuate the building and the project was halted, the clerk's organizational development program had improved efficiencies by remarkable degrees, stopped hurtful turnover, improved morale, and saved thousands of dollars in work-hours. Notably for a public agency, because the costs were so low and services were strengthened rather than curtailed, there were no political considerations involved. Because the staff was moved and the program disrupted, however, the process has yet to be completed. As of this writing, the courthouse still is not available for occupancy.

Originally, the clerk's office had not been poorly run (remember, this is a no-fault approach). The office

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simply stood to benefit from a proper management self-audit. The process found duplication, improperly performed work, gaps in perception, and gross process deficiencies. The efficiencies gained from OPTIM to date, although only partially realized, show that the clerk's office has achieved an estimated total efficiency gain of \$100,000 annually. As important as any one benefit, however, is the fact that the office learned how to review its work and find ways to improve. Even in its current work environment, it continues to find improvements.

The OPTIM process is much like a trip to the dentist's office: people look at the work that needs to be done on their teeth and may hesitate to undergo it. Once the OPTIM process is under way, however, and employees see that it is leading to better management, supervision, and employee involvement, the enthusiasm is pervasive. There is another important benefit: suggestions for improvement are not ignored. The OPTIM process puts the entire operation into a posture of improvement, so that the risks are absorbed and the problem becomes simply one of keeping track of them.

Finally, public management invariably takes place in a political arena, and many problems in government operations exist or persist because of political sensitivity. OPTIM deals only with work flow and performance. It generally avoids triggering political interest, except perhaps the favorable kind. When it does generate political interest, the empirical and analytical nature of the evidence supporting the improvement strengthens the hand of the agency. Following a complete internal review and refurbishment, agency managers are solidly prepared to respond to any questions or suggestions about their agencies' operations. Imagine the comfort in that. **PM**

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*Gary English is principal of Gary English and Associates, Lakeland, Florida.*