It's Time to Start a "Stop Doing" List

by John Durel

The Lesson

Do you have a "To Do" list?

Do you have a "Stop Doing" list?

Darwin Smith, when he became CEO of Kimberly-Clark in 1971, saw that after 100 years the company had become very bureaucratic. There were layers of hierarchy, and lots of little kingdoms. One manifestation was the use of titles. There was the director of this, the chief of that, the deputy assistant director of this, the senior deputy assistant director of that. Smith did not undertake a study to titles. He simply said: "We're going to stop using titles. No more titles. You have a name, and you have a function. That's all."

Jim Collins, in ***Good to Great***, cites Smith as an example of a leader who knows when to stop doing something. More radical than the elimination of titles, under Smith Kimberly-Clark stopped making paper, a core function that had been a part of the company from its founding in 1872. This allowed the company to focus on producing consumer goods made from paper. This part of the business had great potential, because of the strength of brands like Kleenex. By stopping one set of activities, and focusing on the other, the business took off. Eventually, not only did Kimberly-Clark outdistance its rivals, it acquired its chief rival, Scott Paper Company.

The lesson is: ***until you begin to stop doing some things, you will not make significant progress in improving your organization.***

A corollary to the lesson is: ***until you begin to stop doing some things, you will not improve as a manager.***

Your "Stop Doing" List

Here are some provocative ideas of things you might stop doing, in order to become a better manager.

Stop hogging all the work.

- One of the ironies of becoming a manager is that the very traits that enabled you to rise to the position of manager may now stand in the way of your being a good manager. When you were younger you went to work and demonstrated that you could get things done. You showed your supervisor that you had the skills and knowledge needed to do a job. You were reliable. And so you got promoted. Now you're a manager. Now your success depends not on whether you can do a job, but on your ability to enable others to do their jobs. You used to have more control over your own success; now your success depends on others.
- Learn to delegate:
    - Be clear about expectations, standards: what, when, how
    - Coach
    - Hold them accountable

Stop managing people.

- Most people deeply resist being managed. How would you feel if your boss said to you: "My job is to manage you."
- If you have people who need to be managed, you have the wrong people. The best performers are those who know enough and care enough to manage themselves.
- Your job is not to manage people. Your job is to provide a context within which people can manage themselves.
- What context do people need in order to manage themselves?
    - Clear mission, vision, strategic goals
    - Position descriptions, clear expectations
    - Rewards, incentives
    - Values/behavior expectations, standards
- Shift from control to guidance. Shift from Rules, and an HR function of enforcing the rules, to the identification of values that guide employee behavior.

Stop telling employees how to do their jobs.

- Sometimes managers can't help themselves, and not only do they tell their employees *what* to do, they tell them *how* to do it.
- If you tell an employee how to do something, you can hold him accountable only for the activity, not for the results. If he doesn't produce the results you want, he'll say: But I did what you told me to do. Then you get into a disagreement about what you said and what he heard.
- Far better that you tell him the results you want and expect, and let him figure out how to get them. Offer to coach him, but let him figure it out.
- Also, it's a lot easier to be clear and precise about results, than about the process to achieve the results. The process is often complicated, and can be subject to change or interpretation. The results, however, can be clearly stated: Board members will receive financial reports no later than five days before the bi-monthly board meeting.
- Here's another idea: **Stop writing job descriptions.** By describing what an employee does, you may limit creativity. Instead, try writing job assignments. For example, instead of saying: one of your responsibilities is to provide the CEO and board with timely financial information; you might say: your job is to enable the CEO and board to make sound financial decisions.

Stop trying to change people.

- The best managers, according to research by the Gallup consulting organization, say: "People don't change very much. Don't waste time trying to put in what's not there. It's hard enough drawing out the talent that is already there."
- Clearly people can learn new skills and gain new knowledge. Here we are talking about basic talent. What are you adept at? What comes naturally to you? What's easy for you? What are your talents?
- Someone may be adept at using language, spoken or written. Another may be good at using numbers. Some at seeing and delineating complex relationships. Some at seeing the logical steps needed to get something done. Some at sensing how others are feeling. Not everyone have all of these talents. But each of us has some talents.
- Your challenge as a manager is not to cram a person into a job that does not fit their talents, but to re-shape the job to the employee's talents. It's easier to mold or "sculpt" the job, than it is to try to change the person.
- Of course, the job has to align with the organization's mission and goals. But the job also has to match the person. If the match isn't good, either modify the job, or get someone else to do it.

Stop trying to solve problems.

- Here are some of the problems that arise when you focus on your problems." It's depressing. Sometimes trying to solve problems can be frustrating and debilitating. People place barriers in the way:" Here we go again, talking about that again" We already tried that" Nice idea, but we don't have the money to do that" The board will never go along with that" The real problem is Joe, if we just got rid of him.
- An alternative: instead of focusing on what's not working, focus on what is working.
    - What are you really good at?
    - What really works well in your organization?
    - What brings you the greatest success?

  There are several advantages to this approach:

    - It feels good. Gives you energy.
    - It's less theoretical. Instead of saying, "this might work;" you're saying we know this works for us, we just need to do more of it.
    - It creates momentum: the more you do those things that work well, the easier it gets.
    - People like to be with a winner: they like to work for a winner; they like to invest in a winner.
- If you focus too much on your problems, there's a real danger of coming across as a loser.
- Purchase **Building on Strength (BoS) : Constructive Change for Nonprofit Organizations** by **Mary Case** and **Will Phillips**.

Stop treating others as you would like to be treated.

- We're all different.
    - Some of us work fast; some need more time to think about things before making a decision or taking action. Some are comfortable taking risks, others more cautious.
    - Some are able to see the details of the work, others see the big picture.
    - Some are primarily concerned about getting the work done; others want to take longer to make sure it is done right.
    - Some are very comfortable with change, others less so.
- These are just some of the ways in which we differ. Rather than expecting others to be like us, treat them as they would like to be treated. For example, you may be impatient and want a quick decision, but they may need more time.
- Use the Qm² PAEI style assessment to discover how you and your colleagues differ.

Stop doing annual performance reviews.

- Annual performance reviews offer all the benefits, and all the problems, of a report card at the end of a semester.
    - If you don't get a good grade, it comes too late for you to do anything about it. At least in school you got a few test and quiz grades along the way to warn you of a problem. Too often in performance reviews the employee doesn't have a clue. By waiting to review once a year, supervisors have an easy excuse to put off difficult conversations about poor performance.
    - Grade inflation. Just as some college professors don't like to give D's and F's, supervisors don't like to give employees low marks. Why? Again, it's so much easier than engaging in difficult, unpleasant conversations. Like Lake Wobegon, everyone is above average. Or at least everyone expects to be above average. Which means anyone you grade as average may take offence.
    - The real problem with annual performance reviews is that they are not designed to improve performance. In fact, they often have the opposite effect, and reinforce poor performance. Because they are linked to raises or bonuses, they can lead to griping, backbiting, cliques.

- Design a process to *improve* performance process, rather than merely evaluate it.
    - Monthly or quarterly conversations between supervisor and employee
    - Identify specific ways to help the employee improve
    - Set specific goals to work on
    - If no improvement, seek to understand why.
    - Inadequate training
    - Poor job fit
    - At some point it may become obvious, usually to both parties, that it's not working and it's time for that person to leave.
    - What about raises? That will become obvious as well.

Stop trying to treat everyone equally.

- One of the problems in using rules to manage people who can't manage themselves is that everyone has to follow the rules. Thus, you've organized the work around your lowest performers. For example, if a few people can't meet deadlines, you create a system to monitor and report on the progress of a project or task. Even your best people, those who are reliable, whom you can count on to get the job done on time, now have to take time to write weekly or monthly reports. This can be very frustrating for your top performers, and it probably doesn't solve the problem with the poor performers.
- You do have to treat people fairly, but not equally. What's fair?
    - Not based on race, gender, religion, sexual preference or disability
    - Not arbitrary: must be based on what is best for the organization
    - Consistent: values and standards apply to all

      For example, if respect is one of your stated organizational values, everyone must be held to that standard.

- It makes more sense, from the perspective of what is best for the organization and the people you serve, to treat your employees differently, according to their needs.
- Here's a way to break it down:
    - Stars. Those who achieve a lot and have the potential to do much more. Creative and reliable. Reward them with new challenges, leadership opportunities, opportunities to develop new skills.
    - Workhorses: very good at what they do. Really reliable. But don't particularly like new challenges. Give them better support, better equipment, whatever they need to keep producing.
    - Marginal performers: a performance improvement plan, with specific goals and timetable.
    - Consistently marginal or poor performers: When you've reached the conclusion that someone is not good for your organization, **ACT.**

Stop thinking of salaries and benefits as an expense.

- Your organization, as a tax supported nonprofit organization, owes it to the public to create the greatest value with the least expenditure of resources. As a manager you want to maximize revenue, within your mission, and minimize expense, within your mission. If salaries are viewed only as an expense, the natural tendency will be to keep them as low as possible. The only rationale for raising salaries is that if you go too low you won't be able to attract and retain talented people.
- Here's another way to think about salaries. Think of the money as an investment the organization makes in an individual. Your organization is investing a sum of money in an individual, in the hope or expectation of getting some increased value in return.
- Now you can ask: are we satisfied with the rate of return we are getting on that investment? If not, should we invest that money somewhere else? If so, should we invest even more money in that individual?

Stop thinking you have to know the answer.

- You have authority; you do not have control.
- Some managers think it is a sign of weakness to admit that
    - they don't understand something
    - they don't have a solution to a problem
    - they don't know how to perform a certain task
- They think that their employees will think that they are incompetent; that they don't measure up to being a manager. They imagine their employees saying, "we could do a better job than she does."
- In this world knowledge and expertise bring power—for example, consider how much power IT technicians have, with so much of the office routine depending on them.
- Managers can no longer know, or even pretend to know everything.
- There is a paradox: the more you admit publicly that you don't have the power, the more power you have. The more you say: "I don't know the answer, tell me what you think;" or "I've got to make a decision, but I'd like your input first"—the more you use that kind of language, the more people will respect you.
- A striking example comes from the Navy where Commander Michael Abrashoff, back in the Nineties when he was commanding a ship, instead of taking the posture that he would issue orders according to Navy regulations, he instead started to walk around and talk to everyone, of every rank, asking them how they thought the work on the ship could be improved. He ended up with the top ship in the fleet—the Navy has an elaborate evaluation system to test for preparedness.

Starting to Stop

What else could, and should you stop doing? What should your organization stop doing? What should those who work with you stop doing? These questions should be routine in your organization. We are very good at coming up with new things to do. But significant improvement will never come until you and your colleagues learn how to stop doing things and behaving in ways that are no longer effective. Now is the time to start.