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SPECIAL ISSUE

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OPTIMIZING BUSINESS RESULTS

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Part 1 - The Fallacy of "Doing More with Less"

How many individuals and organizations do you know who have bought into the notion that challenging economic times demand that we do "more with less" in order to survive? A recent conversation with colleagues opened my eyes to the realization that those who subscribe to this approach actually are shooting themselves in the foot. Instead of following this misguided advice, they would be better advised to focus on doing LESS with less.

The reality is that while most organizations can find legitimate ways to become more effective - e.g., reduce waste caused by high error rates, sideline programs that are poorly attended, re-think work flow - there comes a point at which further reductions affect the value they provide. It's at this moment that we begin to hear the "We have to do more with less!" mantra. My question is this: "How has 'doing more with less' been working for you?" With few exceptions, the answer appears to be, "Not very well." By trying to ignore realities like the number of hours in a day and the physical and mental limitations of the human beings who produce the goods and services, we do everyone a disservice. And we need to stop doing it - right now.

It's time to let go of the fantasy that we can do "more with less." Why? Because we can't - not if we're honest with ourselves. If we overburden people and systems, we will succeed only in burning out employees, experiencing equipment and process meltdowns, and cutting corners or engaging in other activities that will come back to haunt us in the long-run if not in the short-run. Although it may seem counterintuitive, implementing a "doing less with less" strategy actually results in *increased* productivity and *decreased* stress.

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The new reality is NOT about doing more with less, it's about letting things go.

How do we do that? Letting things go is hard, and it requires making tough choices. NOT making those choices, though, will result in even tougher outcomes. We have to prioritize what we do, relentlessly asking how every person, process, system, program, and policy moves us closer to providing value to our customers/clients. Those people and things that are critical to providing the value must remain; everything else must go.

Though it may not seem so, doing "less with less" actually provides organizational stakeholders, including employees, with a number of wonderful opportunities to optimize results. Here are two major ones:

1. Clear the clutter

Over time, we tend to layer "things" on top of each other, such as adding steps to an existing process or increasing the number of layers in the organizational structure. Even when we are required to tighten our belts, the question usually is "How can we cut back on what we have?" instead of starting with a clean slate and asking, "How can we provide value to our customers/clients most effectively?"

2. Uncover hidden talents and resources

Organizations often are full of people who either are in the wrong jobs (i.e., a mis-fit between job and talent) or who have talents that are underutilized in their current jobs. Employers have a great opportunity now to hone in on their employees' talents and leverage them in ways that serve everyone well. Encourage people to be creative and innovative, and support their efforts. The same logic is true of other resources: most organizations can discover "hidden" resources, or those that are underutilized.

Clearing the clutter and uncovering hidden talent and resources often reveal a great deal of misalignment that has kept the organization from optimizing business results. For those who may be concerned that investing in anything or anyone during challenging economic times is not a good idea, consider this: there is a huge ROI (return on investment) in developing and empowering people, both now and in the future. Remember, one of these days the economy is going to turn around and people will have choices about where they work. Will your good performers choose to stay with YOUR organization? The answer depends on how you treat them *now*.

[Part 2 - How to Prioritize: Doing LESS with Less Effectively](#)

Our article "The Fallacy of 'Doing More with Less'" makes the case that doing LESS with less enables organizations to *increase* productivity because workers are not burned out by trying to do the impossible - i.e., more with less. But just how do we do that? Letting go of things requires making tough choices that managers often are unwilling or unable to make - i.e., they don't know how to prioritize. While the *unwillingness* to make tough choices is as critical an issue to address as is the *inability* to make them, this article is limited to the latter. Here are four techniques that can enhance your ability to prioritize:

1. Be crystal clear about the value the organization provides its customers/clients.

Go back to basics - i.e., what is the organization's mission, the purpose for its existence? Over time, the original mission often gets lost or expanded unintentionally. It's time to re-visit what you're doing and *why*. That is, how are your customers/clients better off for having used your products or services?

2. Identify mission-critical things and people - i.e., be sure every person, program, process, and policy contributes to that value.

Once you have identified the value the organization provides, be relentless about using it as the standard against which everything is evaluated. Only people and things that are *critical* to achieving that value are high priorities. As resources become available you can relax the standard to include things that enhance that value; initially, though, the focus should be on the basics only.

3. Question assumptions and beliefs about everyone and everything, including "sacred cows." Make the phrase, "But we've always done it this way" an unacceptable answer.

One way to make it easier to implement this technique is to begin with a clean slate rather than try to make changes to the status quo. That is, instead of taking the current state of affairs as a given and making adjustments to it, start by considering the value the organization provides (see #1 above) and working backwards. The question might be, "In order to provide this value, what must the organization look like, and how must we operate?" That's a totally different question than one that merely seeks to change to the status quo.

4. Identify the level of risk you are willing to accept, and take actions that are consistent with it. Make it safe for people to take the designated level of risk, and reward and recognize those who do.

Make sure there is a low perceived personal "cost" for employees to make suggestions about how to work more effectively. In our article ["When Silence is NOT Golden,"](#) we address the harm caused when employees engage in a practice called "organizational silence." This is defined in part as choosing to remain silent rather than speak up to make suggestions that will help the organization. When employees believe it is riskier for them to speak up than to remain silent, the organization loses valuable information that can help it work more effectively.

In most organizations, various forms of misalignment creep in over time. One way to minimize that tendency is to ensure that all employees, not just managers, consistently assess programs, policies, processes, and people against the standard of the value provided to customers/clients. Teaching them how to prioritize would be a productive first step in doing that.