

Doing Better with Less

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Faced with a turbulent and uncertain economy, you've made all the tough decisions to stay competitive. You've downsized, doubled-up workloads and extended overtime. In short, you've learned to do more with less.

But what if 'more with less' isn't sustainable? Shouldn't your organization be trying to do better with less?

In the end, it's not just about getting the work done; it's about getting it done in the most effective way possible. And if you're like a lot of organizations, your employees are so busy that they've got no chance to be productive.

The 'more-with-less' mantra has become the standard answer to productivity in a struggling economy. The Economist magazine recently conducted a global survey of more than 600 senior executives to gauge their talent management strategies. The survey found that nearly half of the respondents (48 per cent) characterized their talent management strategy as "trying to do more with less." More than one third (37 per cent) said they had simply told staff to work harder or longer to maintain or boost productivity.

What these firms are not considering, however, is whether the increased stress and strain of constantly piling an increasing workload on a smaller and smaller group of employees is actually compromising productivity and the quality of their work. The reality is that the 'more-with-less' approach can only go on for so long before something, or someone, breaks down.

How can you tell if your organization is cracking under the 'more-is-less' mantra? This will require a detailed assessment of all the things you're asking your employees to do. Although there is an assumption in many organizations that "working harder" will help any employee accomplish more, there is a point where that equation breaks down. Many people have had so many additional tasks and responsibilities ladled onto their plates, they simply don't know what to do first. This creates a mental

gridlock that can, in a short period of time, erode productivity and work quality.

But that is not the only hidden cost of following the 'more-for-less' mantra too far. Top talent is more mobile than ever and employees who may have never given a thought to changing employers in the past are using the workload crunch as an excuse to reconsider their current positions. As people are pushed to, and beyond, their limits, they will begin to wonder if the grass is greener and if they have an opportunity to focus on performing fewer tasks with a higher quality outcome.

The new mantra: doing better with less

Evolving from 'more with less' to 'better with less' is the key to boosting productivity in a slimmed down organization. Far too many employers, after downsizing, have simply taken existing work and spread it among a smaller group of employees, without considering whether that work is core to their strategy and brings true value to their organizations. The key to greater productivity and quality outputs comes from examining closely the work everyone is doing, and identifying the highest value tasks.

This will require work to be placed into three key buckets:

- First, work that is of high value to your customers or contributes significantly to organizational strategy.
- Second, work that is low-value and that has little impact to customers or the organization if it doesn't get done, or that simply must be done in order for the organization to continue operating.
- And finally, new opportunities that could create significant value for customers or the organization if one could find time to address them.

Once every task and responsibility is placed into one of the three buckets, then you can apply a 4-D analysis to re-focus your organization on the work that brings the greatest value.

Delete

Earlier this year, Cisco CEO John Chambers announced his company was abandoning the Flip video camera as a product offering, less than two years after acquiring Flip's architect, Pure Digital Technologies, for \$590 million.

It was a tough decision, but Cisco's performance had been declining for several quarters in a row, and tough decisions had to be made. In a bid to restore the company to profitability, Chambers dumped marginal or struggling units, including Flip, and focused the company on five key core product areas.

This is a fairly high stakes, high-profile example, but it explains the critical need to find those things in your operation that are not adding value, and cut them out. It's all about getting back to what is core. Every complex organization has built into it hundreds of small tasks and responsibilities that are performed without thought to whether they represent any real value to business operations. These should be deleted outright, providing breathing room for workers to focus on high-value tasks.

Some of these functions, groups or tasks will be easy to spot but others will be harder to identify. And there will be a lot of negotiation around certain key functions that, while meaningless to one group or unit, may be very valuable to another.

Diminish

Among human resource professionals, there is an often-told story about the "red shoe report." An executive at a large retailer once asked his merchandising department how many red shoes the company sold. An employee was tasked with sorting through sales data to mine out the exact number of red shoes the company sold. The problem was, the 'red shoe report' became a regular output of the merchandising department. The report just kept getting produced even though the person who originally commissioned it had long lost interest in the subject matter.

What are the tasks that can be streamlined, simplified or made more efficient? These are tasks that need to be done, but perhaps not as often or in as great a magnitude as traditionally performed. Every organization has areas where, in response to a need or challenge, there is overkill in terms of response. Dial these back and work with those affected to figure out what still needs to be done, and what can be ditched. This will provide your employees some much-needed respite.

Delay

Perhaps you've been in this meeting. The CEO is gathered with his senior VPs, and without warning announces that he thinks it would be really cool if they could create a new application that would help them generate more business with a key customer. Without explicitly being asked, the senior VPs scurry from the board room and immediately task their teams "to make it so." No analysis of the value of the idea, and no consideration of the value of the work that will be pushed aside to undertake this new project.

Before foisting a new project onto your team, it makes sense to look at the work already being done and figure out what could be moved to the back burner. Although it seems counter-intuitive to some, smart organizations realize that sometimes you need to slow down to find ways to go faster.

The delay strategy can work as well in crisis management. Many middle or senior managers report never having time to work on long-term projects because they are always putting out pressing, current fires. In some instances, it may be best to let these conflicts work themselves out. Some fires can actually put themselves out if the people involved are given the time and space to find solutions themselves. This has the added benefit of building confidence and problem-solving capacity in lower levels of an organization. It's real-life experience that not every problem needs to be pushed one level up.

Distribute

The 'let-them-work-it-out-for-themselves' equation dovetails quite nicely with the fourth D, which is to distribute work to a wider group of employees. The process of delegation must begin with a hard analysis to ensure the right people are doing the right work. Often, if you've got an employee with the wrong skill set trying to cover off a project they are simply not equipped to handle, you're creating stress and a productivity problem.

Sometimes, it will be necessary to delegate tasks to a team and let them work out the best team members for the job. In other instances, it may be that outsourcing a task to a subject matter expert is more effective than asking someone to do something they are not qualified to do.

The Four Ds are not without peril. You should expect to see pushback from within an organization, especially if distributing, diminishing or deleting work in its entirety is viewed as a threat to an individual's job. However, if an organization takes the time to analyze the work currently being done, and then presents a new set of priorities to the workforce in a transparent way, the Four Ds can be fairly represented as an antidote to the 'do-more-with-less' crunch, and lead an organization into the more productive discussion about how to 'do better with less.'