

By Jeff “Chief” Urbaniak
COLUMNIST (www.AdviceChief.com)

Would they? And who would notice? Your boss, a colleague, a subordinate? Another organization? The public? A partner? A supplier? A distributor?

Is there something you have to do you consider a waste of your time, not effective, unnecessary, or that does not have any impact on an outcome, objective, or goal? If so, have you wondered who would notice if you stopped doing it? These are questions most of us have asked at one time or another.

As a leader or manager, you also should keep this question in mind when giving orders or directives, or when creating policies and procedures. You should ask yourself, “If they stopped doing this, would I notice?”

When I was a superintendent back in the day, some people would occasionally complain to me about tasks their supervisor made them do that they deemed to be petty and a waste of their time. When I’d look into the matter, I’d discover that either the task was necessary but not communicated effectively to them, or that it really was a waste of their time--mainly because the task was issued in haste and lacked a valid reason.

One time a worker complained to me about being appointed as Coffee Cup Monitor. She was directed by her supervisor to place everyone’s coffee cup out on the break-room counter top each morning in an order that coincided with the organizational chart. Then at the end of the day she had to ensure all of the cups were returned to the cupboard. If they weren’t she had to track down the missing ones in department cubicles and see to it they were washed and returned to the cupboard.

As I peeled back the onion on this Coffee Cup Monitor duty, I discovered

half of the people in that particular department didn’t even drink coffee and the other half that did, didn’t notice or care that someone was placing cups in an orderly fashion for them each morning. After discussing this extra duty with the supervisor who created it, he became enlightened and agreed with me that people could find, use, clean, and return their own coffee cups to the break-room cupboard without any assistance or supervision. The next day I could hear Forrest Gump’s voice echoing from the atrium: “And just like that, there was no more Coffee Cup Monitor.”

In another scenario, an employee complained to me about having to compile data into a daily report and placing them in a folder on the organizational drive every day. She suspected that no one looked at those reports and that her efforts collecting and consolidating data for them was a waste of her time.

So I began reviewing the reports myself and it seemed to me these reports could be produced monthly rather than daily. Some data was relevant, but not necessarily on a daily basis. So, during a staff meeting I began asking questions about the data in the most recent reports to the department heads sitting around the table. Not one was able to intelligently discuss any of the data in those reports the employee spent hours collecting and digitizing. It turned out she was right--no one read those reports! After I left the conference room at the conclusion of the meeting, I could once again hear Forrest Gump’s voice echoing in the hallway: “And just like that, there were no more daily reports.”

After much thought, I resorted to doing something I learned from time management expert Laura Stack. I gave authorization for employees wrestling with a non-mission-essential or menial

tasks they felt were wasting their time to stop doing them. Then if no one noticed for 30 days, management was required to conduct a full-scale review to determine and justify the relevancy of the task not done and not noticed. (If it was a monthly task, the no-notice rule extended out to three months, and the rule did not apply to orders or tasks issued only once.)

On the other hand, if someone did notice the task was not accomplished, then the person responsible had to get on it and accomplish it immediately. And afterwards they were afforded the opportunity to submit a report to the quality control office highlighting why they felt the task was a waste of time or lacked relevance or purpose.

In a short amount of time, I noticed managers becoming more thoughtful and conscientious when making decisions or giving orders involving tasks not deemed to be mission-essential. As a result, there was less wasted time and fewer complaints, and morale improved.

Some leaders and managers will disagree with this tactic of letting employees arbitrarily decide to stop doing something. They insist it will lead to insubordination and/or laziness. If your boss thinks this way, tread lightly. The boss is the boss and you are required to follow orders when the rubber meets the road. But to that kind of boss I have to ask: If no one notices something not being accomplished, then why was it necessary in the first place?

Time and purpose are important for everyone in an organization. Avoid doing things or giving orders to do things that, if not accomplished, no one would notice. The organizations that master this concept are efficient and effective. Those that don’t have tires spinning in mud in desolate locations.

~ The End ~