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The Cheeseburger Paradox: The Question of Reliability

Order a Cheeseburger—Get a Cheeseburger

Your local mom 'n' pop restaurant probably serves a meal that's more to your liking than you get at the fast-food franchise down the road. But if you're like most people, you probably find yourself at the franchise as often as not. Why?

The easy answer, of course, is that fast food is faster. Certainly this is part of it, but don't you find yourself saying, "Well, I've only got a half hour and Eb & Flo's *usually* gets the order to me that fast, but I'd better go to Burger Chain just to be sure I'm not late for my appointment"?

Have you ever had the experience of going to a restaurant and having the kitchen totally forget your order? Most of us have experienced this once or twice. This is far more likely to happen at an independent restaurant than at a chain franchise.

This presents something of a paradox. The independent restaurant genuinely cares about your experience. The people

working there have a much more personal connection with their employer, so they're also probably motivated to please you. The immediate supervisor is probably better qualified and more highly motivated at the independent than at the franchise. Still, the chain gets you the cheeseburger on time every time and the independent does not!

This paradox doesn't apply just to restaurants. Managers of highly talented groups with wide-ranging responsibilities often find themselves in a similar situation. Things "get dropped." Promises "fall off the table." Opportunities are missed. Customers are dissatisfied. The more highly talented group that prides itself on the highest level of customer service has difficulty meeting the expectations of its customers or constituents. When you forget to respond to a customer, you'll have difficulty convincing them that your service is of a higher quality than the group with simpler responsibilities that gets to everything on time.

The paradox, then, is that the group with more talent is more likely to make mistakes that are visible to the outside world than a competing group with fewer talents.

The reason is fairly obvious—the group with simpler responsibilities has an easier time managing those responsibilities. Notice, though, what this does to the reputation of the more highly skilled group. Your high value added will be weighed against your mistakes. The high-value-added organization can't get by with outperforming the price-point competitor on some features and not on others. The high-value-added organization has to be intensely vigilant to avoid making visible mistakes. Otherwise, the high value won't be perceived and the organization won't thrive. Which, more than likely, is what's happening to Eb & Flo's.

The solutions are less obvious. Eb and Flo have more to think about than the manager of the franchise burger joint across the street, after all. Is it worth it? This book is for the people who think it is. The high-value, high-complexity operation cannot afford to deliver inferior service, even though the added complexity makes such a failure more likely.

> ### Don't Settle for More
> **CAUTION!**
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> It's great to aim high, to attempt to do more and do it better. But unless you can do that reliably, unless your customers can depend on you, you've got problems.
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> The chain restaurant with the inferior sandwich gets the sandwich to the customer every time. The specialty restaurant may boast better ingredients and preparation, but often the service is sluggish and once in a while the people forget to deliver the order altogether. This is not *despite* their broader talents but *because of* them—they're trying to do more things and so they take on greater complexity.
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> Complexity is an explanation but not an excuse. The high-value-added operation cannot afford to deliver inferior service.

Managing for Reliability

Unreliable brilliance will almost always lose out to reliable adequacy. Think about that. In most fields, brilliance is worthless without reliability. (A music composer is one of the rare exceptions. A composer can thrive on the results of his or her best efforts, but most of us have to live with the consequences of our failures as well as those of our successes.)

Reliability has a very simple meaning. The reliable worker or workgroup finishes every work item, in a reasonable amount of time and with reasonable quality. Most people who are capable of brilliance are capable of reliability, but it doesn't often come easy. Being competent means you can

> **Key Term**
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> **Reliability** Getting the job done effectively and on time every time. A reliable individual is capable of being depended upon. The reliable individual has learned to manage peaks and valleys in workload without dropping the ball.

get the job done. Being reliable means you can get the job done every time.

Prioritizing Isn't Enough

Of course, in a crisis situation it's important to prioritize your obligations and decide what to do in what order. In Chapter 6, we'll describe how to recover from an existing work overload.

> **Key Term**
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> **Workload** The total time that your team will put into a project. It's usually measured in workdays or fractions thereof. Workload may be substantially less than duration if there are points in the project where mechanical processes, outside organizations, or busy queues delay the project while it is active.

Prioritizing your obligations will be an important part of the strategy. And in Chapter 9, we'll go into more detail about the uses and abuses of prioritization.

For the moment, we'll just venture the opinion that prioritization is a wildly over-prescribed medicine, especially if it's not accompanied by other improvements. Many overloaded groups and individuals are forever attending to crises and ignoring other "less important" responsibilities. This is a bad strategy, as responsibilities ignored almost inevitably develop into crises.

Of course, priorities will always exist. Restocking the mailroom should be put on hold if the building is on fire, to take an extreme example. But many people and organizations are far too quick to abandon systematic progress to summon a heroic effort

> **For Example**
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> ### Focus on Crisis Creates Crisis
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> Here's a situation that shows how excessive team focus on crisis causes further crises.
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> We recently consulted with a very talented and creative new CEO. His strengths were in making deals and in maintaining connections among powerful allies, but he had developed little skill in dealing with details. The CEO, impatient with details, was unresponsive to staff requests for meetings to make decisions that were less than urgent, and he left them hanging regarding which decisions they should make themselves and which they should hand over to the boss.
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> The natural result was that staff delayed decisions as long as possible, so the office was perpetually in a state of crisis. Things ignored at first because they were not considered urgent would constantly develop into problems. This in turn contributed to the stress that prevented a calm review of pending activity.
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> We recommended a regular meeting, with administrative staff—and not the CEO—controlling the agenda.

for a particular objective. This strategy should be used very sparingly.

Making Progress on All Fronts

In short, then, always focusing on your high-priority A list until it's completed, and then moving on to the medium-priority B list, is a strategy for a calmer world than you're likely to be facing as a manager. Always focusing on the A list until it's com-

> **Prioritizing Can Backfire!**
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> An operation that pays attention only to high-priority tasks is constantly generating mini-crises and errors by leaving practically everything to the last minute. Urgent actions and decisions are more stressful than decisions made early. Such stress reduces capabilities, increases peripheral errors, and undermines routines. Focusing on urgent tasks and neglecting those that are not is a great way of making sure you'll have more urgencies than you can handle.

pleted presumes that it will at some time be completed. Always focusing on the A list until it's completed means that items on the B list will languish until they're serious enough to make the A list or are so far overdue that they're best forgotten. Always focusing on the A list is a recipe for permanent crisis.

We need to deliver on every cheeseburger order that we accept, whether or not any single cheeseburger is important to our mission. The reason is simple: although delivering a particular cheeseburger may be unimportant, failing to deliver it is critically important. It affects how we are perceived and the extent to which others will be interested in our services or in cooperating with us.

Your critical objective in managing a complicated work environment is to ensure that every task that's accepted is eventually completed. Everyone who orders a cheeseburger must eventually get one. Also, it must be exactly the cheeseburger that person ordered. What's more, that person must consider the time taken to deliver the cheeseburger to be reasonable.

The basic way to do this is to devote enough time and effort to every task to get it done on time. In practical terms, this

> ### If You Can't Possibly Do It, Admit It—Quick!
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> If you're starting to fall drastically behind, you can warn your customers about expected delays. In most circumstances, this will slow demand a bit. This will allow you to be honest with the people interested in your work about what they can expect.
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> The sooner you warn people about impending delays, the better able they will be to adjust. Then, if you succeed in delivering on time, little harm will have been done. On the other hand, if you don't alert anyone to the problem until the last minute, you'll probably cause much greater inconvenience.

means putting time into lower-priority items, even when there are high-priority items on your list!

Strange as it may seem, in the end your best strategy is to spend some fraction of your time dealing with B-list items and, heck, even a C-list item once in a while. We will help you firm up your strategy in later chapters, when we analyze the types of workflow that your group faces and devise strategies that are appropriate for your circumstances.

Keeping All Your Promises

This book will help you manage reliably in the face of complexity. Before we plunge into the details, though, allow us to emphasize the central point. A *commitment is a commitment*. If you can't do something you promised, that's bad. There are no low-priority promises or commitments. When you agree that you or your team will deliver, it's a commitment, not a priority.

Notice that this means two things are necessary. You need to know how available you are for the additional responsibility, and you need to be in a position to refuse it.

If your own boss asks you to do something that's outside your capacity, it's not insubordination to refuse—in fact, it's your responsibility. If the pressure persists, it's best to show the person making the request all of your responsibilities and ask him or her which one to defer or drop. Over-promising to customers or to supervisors is always a bad idea.

Similarly, if a subordinate refuses a request from you, ask

> **Treat All Commitments as High-Priority Items**
> The most important factor in being seen as reliable is to deliver on your promises every time. The most important factor in delivering on all your promises is to avoid making promises you can't keep.
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> The time to prioritize is *before* you make promises, not *after*. Your overall plan should account for higher- and lower-priority objectives. When someone presents you with a work item and you're deciding whether you can accept it, that's the last chance to consider its priority.

him or her to justify the refusal. (This will help you understand what that person is doing, so there's at least that up side.) If the person's workload is too heavy to allow for the new request, decide which element to defer or drop.

You have the extra duty of repairing any damage caused by this shift, either by transferring some responsibilities to another person or by renegotiating with the person you made your promise to.

This includes commitments to members of your staff. The immediate consequences of failing to meet commitments to your subordinates may be relatively small in the short run, but in the long run not keeping your commitments has enormous consequences in morale, productivity, and even turnover.

Often in a situation of over-commitment, or even of opportunity, internal commitments are the first to go. This almost always appears to be a good short-run solution. In taking this step, it's important to be aware of long-range consequences for morale.

For instance, the result of habitually neglecting an internal process will be that your staff won't take internal process improvements seriously. Not only enthusiasm will suffer. It's also likely that efforts to implement improvements will not meet with enough compliance to put them to the test effectively.

The Intuitive Workplace

You may encounter managers who seem to know exactly what to do next without seeming to plan anything out at all.

An interesting example came up when we did workflow con-sultations for many of the school principals in our district. Most of them were constantly struggling to keep up with their huge and varied workloads and complex meeting schedules. We applied many of the cognitive techniques that we'll describe in this book and helped them achieve enough visual, spatial, and conceptual clarity that they could be dramatically more effective.

Then we met one fellow who's been principal of a particular middle school for decades. His office is as much a visual jumble as any of the others and his file cabinet is arranged in a fashion we found incomprehensible. He has a cramped and scrawled desktop calendar, with spaces too small to contain all the infor-mation he jams into it. Yet, he really does "know where every-thing is." Though a hard worker (and, like every principal we met, quite willing to do unpaid overtime, an aspect of our school system of which we should not be too proud), this fellow is calmly and contentedly managing while doing almost every-thing in a way that most people with a much simpler workload would find inadequate. How is this possible?

Without exception, every time we've met a manager who's successfully coping with a complex workload using very simple systems, that person has been in the job for a very long time. The organizational structure that most others would need is burned into that person's mind. That person has become an effective intuitive manager, such as described in Chapter 1.

We've also seen that such managers work in supportive envi-ronments. Teachers, staff, parents, and children constantly remind school principals of ongoing problems, and no one wants them to fail or be too quick to take their business elsewhere.

We don't expect many successful intuitive managers to be reading this book. But if you happen to be one, please don't put it aside. There's still the problem of succession. How will you describe your job to your successor when you leave?

Another common feature of the successful intuitive manager is that the workload is more or less constant or has increased gradually over time. Neither situation, by definition, applies to the

new manager. Typically, the new manager needs more formality than the person who has been in the position for a long time.

Sometimes the formality that a new manager needs can be temporary; it can be relaxed as the situation becomes more familiar. The new manager may at first require more diligent reporting from the team members, and then may find it possible to loosen the reins.

Even the consistently successful informal workplace may fail abruptly in the face of too much opportunity. According to Dr. Robert Pricer, of the Grainger School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, about 30% of bankruptcies happen to growing, profitable businesses. The immediate cause is always a cash-flow crunch, but this can be seen as lack of foresight, as managers doing things the way they've always been done and relying on a sense that "things are all right" rather than doing a cash flow analysis, which is a very boring exercise in a steady company but absolutely critical in one undergoing rapid growth.

An Intuitive Manager: Groundskeeper at a Fortune 500 Headquarters

We know of a facilities supervisor for the national headquarters of an insurance company. Managing four employees, she's responsible for maintaining an enormous complex of hundreds of acres, including highly landscaped displays, a prairie restoration, and a great deal of road and parking space. She's also started and continues to manage several recycling programs.

In the Wisconsin climate, the nature of the work varies dramatically with the seasons. This manager was trained as a landscape architect and never received any management training. Her only formal technique is to "write things down on a pad of paper and cross them off when they are done." Yet, she manages all this complexity quite successfully. She fits our profile of the successful intuitive manager: she's been at the job a long time and her responsibilities have grown gradually along with the size of the company and properties.

But there's a problem. She is approaching retirement. She speculates that when she leaves no one will be able to fill her role and the company might outsource its landscaping needs to a specialized company.

Many problems of organization are scale-dependent. If you have five pieces of paper to keep track of, it's reasonable to just stack them on your desk. If you have five thousand, you need a file cabinet and a firm grasp of the alphabet. If you're running the Library of Congress, you need something considerably more complicated than that. If you're a freelance writer, you can handle your business with a to-do list. If you're the CEO of General Electric, it takes something more complicated than a simple to-do list.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 2

❏ Reliability is part of value. High-value-added operations are more challenging to manage and are more likely to have reliability problems than simpler operations. This detracts from their perceived value and hurts them in the marketplace.

❏ The value of prioritization is overstated and prioritization is misused. You should prioritize *before* you make a commitment, not *after*. To be perceived as reliable, you must treat every commitment as a high priority.

❏ Habitual prioritization of ongoing tasks leads to a crisis mentality. This in turn leads to frequent crises.

❏ Time must be allocated to every commitment. The time allocation needs to be careful and consistent.

❏ Tracking workloads is a necessity in a busy workplace. When a workload becomes excessive, it's necessary to renegotiate, but this should be avoided as much as possible.

❏ Some workplaces can get by informally. These are usually places with long-term stability, limited growth rates, and tight integration with other groups that tend to catch errors early in a supportive way.