Killing the Grass: Pathways to Corporate Excellence

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As part of a consulting contract, I visited a product distribution facility with a client. The leadership team of the business was there and, as part of their agenda, they invited some of the employees to meet them and talk about what they do, what suggestions they had for improving the business, and their general view of things.

When asked what could be done to make his job better, one employee, who had been there about 15 years, talked about the difficulties some systems create given both the computer system and the corporate procedures. The atmosphere in the room was casual and comfortable and eventually this employee indicated that they had developed a number of "work-arounds" to avoid the unnecessary work and hassle of the formal systems.

The Grass and Concrete Story

Every workplace we've ever visited has "work-around" stories. Work-arounds or "underground procedures" are an accepted part of doing business. In corporate leadership education, these stories would be part of the syllabus of a course on how to get better in a most inexpensive way.

The killing-the-grass story originated in a graduate school statistics course where the professor was explaining that there are fundamentally two kinds of data: (1) that which exists in its natural form (e.g., the number of students in a classroom) and (2) that which we create to provide a quantitative "measure" of a phenomenon (e.g., IQ scores, moral development scale, climate survey ratings).

He said that one example of the use of natural data would be in the development of an office park. In designing a park, the architects would map the locations of building, the parking lots, and the sidewalks for the complex. In this case, the location of the sidewalks would be based on a series of logical assumptions made by the architects. In America, we seem to design in square and put things like sidewalks at right angles. Alternatively, the professor indicated that they could have used natural data (called "unobtrusive" in statistics) to be certain that their design was correct.

"How would they do that?" asked the class.

The professor suggested that the developers could build the complex and simply plant grass around all the buildings and between the parking areas and the buildings. Then, they come back the following spring and **install the concrete sidewalks where the grass was killed by the traffic to and from the buildings.**

Did you ever notice that when you are in an area in which the sidewalks are not quite in the right place that people will make their own path? That often happens where the walk makes a right angle turn onto another walk and people "cut the corner" killing the grass where they walk.

Or, sometimes people will "cut across the lawn" to take the most efficient route to where they are going. Our postman does it all the time…you can see the tracks in the snow in the winter and, in summer, an irreparable brown pathway of trampled earth linking my home to our neighbor's in a direct, but most undesirable way. Such a phenomenon also frequently occurs in front of municipal buildings where the landscape design is not consistent with transportation and pedestrian traffic patterns.

The **"Work-Around"** Connection

It strikes me that this principle is directly analogous to the reports we heard in the warehouse. The employees' "work-arounds" are simply an organizational equivalent of the dead grass and sidewalks. The employees figure out where the pathways (systems or procedures) ought to be and find a way, if at all possible, to get them there. They take the most efficient route to their goal. The corporate system designers often see this type of activity as surreptitious behavior at best or a "violation" of company policy at worst.

Unlike the dead grass in my lawn where the U.S. Postal Service employees walk, the efficient, street-wise "underground" systems and procedures exist below the corporate radar screens. Moreover, this behavior often reflects the best examples of employee intelligence and ingenuity, though it is rarely embraced in any official way.

Employees will continue to "kill the grass" when the path isn't right. We heard stories in Ford where assembly line workers would ignore process procedures yielding a better quality product), John Deere where engineers would work-around corporate product engineering change procedures to cut months off a design or assembly change, a steel mill in Illinois where maintenance workers horded parts in lockers they needed to repair critical machinery so that repairs could be made on a timely basis. In McDonnell-Douglas' C-17 a manager would send employees to the hardware store to buy essential, inexpensive equipment that would take weeks to get through the purchasing system and cost several times as much. We witnessed the frustration of university staff over purchase order systems that cost ten times that of the item to process the paperwork. There are examples everywhere you turn.

"Concrete" Lessons: The Design of Efficient and Effective Systems

If you are in an established organization, there is probably plenty of dead grass in your system. It was created by the "underground" systems employees have devised to improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of the organization. As long as they are not jeopardizing safety or ultimate product/service quality, then the dead grass is probably a good thing.

How could we make use of it? Well, we could do the same thing that the designers of an office park would do if they used the grass-planting strategy to determine where the sidewalks should be: *we could get the employees to tell us where the underground, dead-grass systems are and make them the official, formal systems for the business.* Then people could stop hiding what they really do (for fear that they will be fired for violating procedures) and help us get better, faster, cheaper business processes in place.

We have found that this is only achieved when leadership is able to embrace the idea that every organization has people on the "front lines" who **absolutely** know where the sidewalks should go. Frequent, honest communication through polling and roundtable sessions not only help bring this key knowledge from the keepers to the policy makers, but also helps foster trust and eliminate unnecessary employee frustration!

As these examples demonstrate, efficient grass-killing pathways resulting by the wisdom of employee intelligence and experience will likely improve performance more than some of the official procedural sidewalks created by people who never get an opportunity to use them.