

The Doctrine of Completed Staff Work

The following memorandum has been reproduced countless times by military and civilian organizations since World War II and has become a widely accepted definition of what effective staff members do. The original source of the memorandum is unclear. Some reports indicate that the memo was issued in January 1942 by the Provost Marshal General, U.S. Army. It has also been attributed to Brigadier G.E.R. Smith, a member of the Royal Canadian Army, who released it in 1943, while he was serving as Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport, First Canadian Army.

The doctrine of “completed staff work” will be the doctrine of this office.

“Completed Staff Work” is the study of a problem, and presentation of a solution, by a staff officer, in such form that all that remains to be done on the part of the head of the staff division, or the commander, is to indicate his approval or disapproval of the completed action. The words “completed staff action” are emphasized because the more difficult the problem is the more the tendency is to present the problem to the chief in piece-meal fashion. It is your duty as a staff officer to work out the details. You should not consult your chief in the determination of those details, no matter how perplexing they may be. You may and should consult other staff officers. The product, whether it involves the pronouncement of a new policy or affect an established one, should when presented to the chief for approval or disapproval, be worked out in finished form.

The impulse which often comes to the inexperienced staff officer to ask the chief what to do, recurs more often when the problem is difficult. It is accompanied by a feeling of mental frustration. It is so easy to ask the chief what to do, and it appears so easy if you do not know your job. It is your job to advise your chief what he ought to do, not to ask him what you ought to do. He needs your answers, not questions. Your job is to study, write, reread and rewrite until you have evolved a single proposed action – the best one of all you have considered. Your chief merely approves or disapproves.

Do not worry your chief with long explanations and memoranda. Writing a memorandum to your chief does not constitute completed staff work - but writing a memorandum for your chief to send to someone else does. Your view should be placed before him in finished form so that he can make them his views by simply signing his name. In most instances, completed staff work results in a single document prepared for the signature of the chief, without accompanying comment. If the proper result is reached, the chief will usually recognize it at once. If he wants comment or explanation, he will ask for it.

The theory of completed staff work does not preclude a “rough draft”, but the rough draft must not be a half-baked idea. It must be completed in every respect except that it lacks the requisite number of copies and need not be neat. But a rough draft must not be used as an excuse for shifting to the chief the burden of formulating the action.

The “completed staff work” theory may result in more work for the staff officer, but it results in more freedom for the chief. This is as it should be. Further, it accomplishes two things:

- a. The chief is protected from half-baked ideas, voluminous memoranda, and immature oral presentations.
- b. The staff officer who has a real idea to sell is enabled more readily to find a market.

When you have finished your “completed staff work” the final test is this: If you were the chief would you be willing to sign the paper you have prepared, and stake your professional reputation on its being right? If the answer is negative, take it back and work it over because it is not yet “completed staff work.”