

The first e-mail contained the below statement. Being an experienced manager, I sensed a “campaign” brewing, but I did not realize how much time this one would suck. This was in fact a serious initiative.

*It has been determined we are too bureaucratic an organization, so the entire conglomerate must go on a mission to eliminate the waste of bureaucracy. First, we have too much bureaucracy, and it is causing us to be slow and inefficient. We needed to focus on people, processes and products, and to simplify.*

---

The first wave of simplification began, fittingly enough, with black belt projects. We were rounded up and split into groups and immediately spent a day developing the contracts. We then spent a few weeks in the define phases, a couple of months in measure, a week in the improve phase, then went into the control phase, which fundamentally consists of developing power points to show upper management. If they were really good ones, you would get the privilege of flying up to Michigan in February and showing it at an MSU training class.

The simplification posters started showing up a few months into it (black belt projects, power points, trips to Michigan, and then posters was the natural order of things). Then we started talking about improvements.

Later, the Queen of Tarts had his visage added to the portal, so the first thing you saw in the morning was his delightful fish like face. It was frightening. I did not dare log on from home for fear of scaring the children or cat. We started cropping the photo and sending it to each other during teleconferences when someone said something stupid. You would get an e-mail, and up would pop the Queen of Tarts! Most of soon developed the habit of turning on the computer in the morning, and waiting, poised to salute, the visage of the Queen when he popped up, but it was the one finger salute with two hands that was provided.

In one epic, CEO and CFO led meeting, it was determined the expensed items ordering process was way too complicated, and projects were spun out to all the divisions to correct this bureaucratic error. In my own unit, all purchases (ALL) had to be approved by the VP of ISC. Where this was funny was the secretary would submit the request, then the buyer would approve, then the materials manager had to approve, then the plant manager, then the Director, then the VP. So many were in the approval process, but none were final approvers until the VP level. If you want a steno pad, up the ladder the request would go! Huge cost would be incurred but not recognized as the machinations of the bureaucracy churned upwards. On the plus side for the company though, most of us could not stand the process so bought our own pens and paper, so maybe the cost was offset somehow (not).

The last piece to this that made it really, really special was during the quarterly “Town Hall” meeting, where the Queen of Tarts (who was acting VP of ISC at the time since he had fired 3 that year already, and he must have reached a quota and run out of tags or something) told everyone how fucked up supply chain was, and how he had been asked to approve STENO

PADS. His audience at the main office laughed. Supply Chain really was a mess, if the VP of ISC had to approve STENO PADS. We in the plants were not amused though so we made sure the next 10 orders he had to approve were for Maxi Pads. When he approved them quickly, we realized he would approve any feminine hygiene product rather than ask questions about it, so we submitted a lot more orders under that description, and he kept approving. I suppose the \$52,000 order that really involved an industrial oven was too much, so he routed all requests through his female strategy manager, and that stopped this avenue. It was fun for awhile though.

It did not stop though the simplification efforts. Costs were up, we were swimming in maxi pads (or should have been) and things had slowed down considerably, but were we really simplifying?

After several waves of projects, the plant managers were given authority to purchase items up to \$2,000 without seeking prior approval (except for feminine hygiene product which still needed to be approved by the Strategy Manager). Sounds like progress! Unfortunately not, for two reasons.

First, along the way a blackbelt project had identified us as not “leveraging the enterprise”. The project was a few years ago, but the solution, to centralize indirect, expensed purchases through the plane company in Wichita, had taken awhile to implement. Anything over \$2,000 now no longer went to the Director and VP, it now also went to Wichita, and Wichita wanted 3 quotes on everything, and added two approvers in the process. Sometimes, they would add even more.

The second issue was along the way it was also discussed that the buyers for the raw materials used in production did not have an approval process. While it was recognized that all Pos were reviewed weekly, it was argued that they were not approved prior to being issued. While this was true, it was also true that in most cases the big dollar items were the things we used a lot of, on a weekly basis. At the end of the day though, it was decided the plant buyers needed to use the approval process the indirect expense buyers were using, and about 98% of the purchased dollars used in production were now pushed into the multi level approval process, including Wichita, which always wanted three quotes, even if the supplier was the same one we used for 20 years, and even if our purchases were the same materials we had used every week for those twenty years.

And capital purchases were even worse! A later article will document the Death of an improvement project, directly impacted by this bureaucracy reduction initiative.

Later, it was determined we had too many meetings, and as an outcome, we were assigned to teams to determine what meetings we could eliminate. We had meetings to develop charters on how to eliminate meetings, then meetings to write contracts on how to eliminate meetings, then meetings to define the issues, then into analyze phase, and so on. The push to eliminate meetings just buried my schedule and everyone else's.

So now we were really bogged down. Frustrated I came to work the following Monday, and The Queen of Tarts visage was on the portal again. This week's missive involved how he had personally taken charge, and reduced bureaucratic waste in the indirect expense approval process. I gave him the middle finger salute, and went looking for sharp objects to hold while running through the streets naked.