

BY MELANIE HODGDON

Mapping Your Company's Restart

In these days of uncertainty, nobody can predict whether, when, or to what extent “business as usual” will return. As a client of mine remarked, “Even when science suggests that it’s ‘safe’ to open businesses, how do we know whether our customers will come back?”

Realistic questions like this spark additional ones, including:

- Will I be able to rehire my workforce if there’s insufficient work to support them?
- What criteria should be used to determine how the workforce changes in terms of roles?
- If roles are to be consolidated, shared, or split up, what’s the best way to approach this?
- Might our current processes and procedures be overhauled to reduce or eliminate duplication, redundancies, or missing parts?

One of the impediments to improvement is that a company’s current practices tend to be so ingrained and feel so comfortable that it may be difficult to identify possible replacements for them. I often hear business owners talk about having their employees write up their respective job descriptions. But this strategy is usually unsuccessful, because these documents become only a record of what is, not what could or should be. And the tasks are described in isolation, so the precedent and dependent activities are left out. In effect, this is like asking a cog to describe its job, when what is

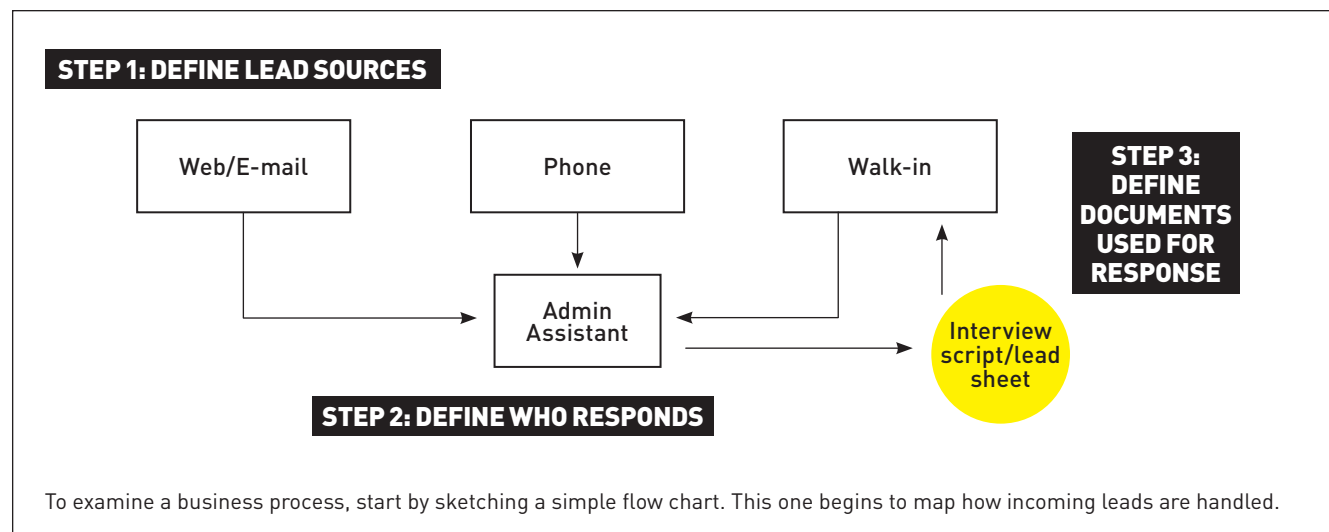
more important is how that cog serves the purpose of the entire machine through its interaction with other cogs. Focusing on employee procedures is also misguided because these procedures are typically handed down from individual to individual as personnel change. This can lead to misunderstandings, changes in procedure that produce unintended consequences, perpetuation of inefficient or irrelevant processes, and a lack of context.

I currently use software to assist companies in streamlining processes, defining roles, and improving what I’ll call “paperwork” (contracts, manuals, procedural documents, and so on), but in the past I usually did it with a big sheet of paper, with input from key field and office personnel. The results can be extremely revealing, and I recommend the exercise as a way to understand what’s happening in your company even when you’re using software to streamline operations.

MAPPING A PROCESS

Start with a particular process, such as how incoming leads are handled. Then “just” trace everything that happens, who is involved, how information is shared, and which “pieces of paper” are used. You don’t have to make a pretty flow chart, but it does help to use colors or different shapes to represent roles or individuals.

The diagram below is one example that examines leads coming



via three pathways—website/e-mail, phone, and walk-ins (if you have an office or showroom). Start by drawing boxes for those three lead sources, and then define who responds to each one. Put that down, too, and link the bubbles. Here's where you start to see whether, and how, the responses might differ, and whether that's a good thing, something to attempt to automate, or something you want to change.

In the case shown in the flow chart on the previous page, all initial inquiries go through a designated gatekeeper—the administrative assistant (AA). In small companies in which everybody's wearing multiple hats, this person could be a receptionist, salesperson, or even the owner.

Now what? Well if it's a walk-in and a salesperson is available, the AA would link the walk-in prospect with the salesperson, who would then run with the ball.

So let's follow that thread for a minute. What existing documentation (such as a lead sheet or "script") does the company use to streamline the prospect interview process? If there are forms used, stick those in, too. Listing them will let you see what's in use (which might benefit from updating) or where you may want to insert a new form. Stick that in there, perhaps in color.

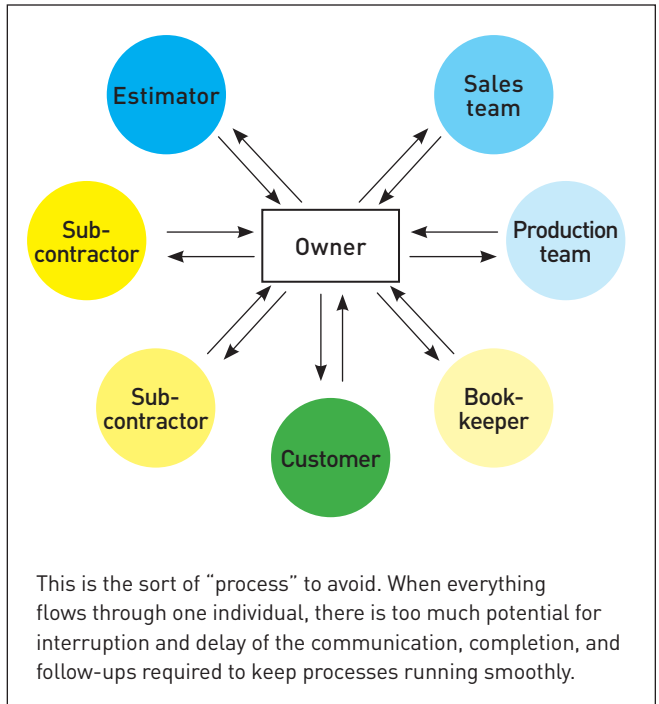
Then what happens? If the next step is a sales call, how is that scheduled? Does the salesperson set the date and time or does the AA? Let's assume the salesperson sets the sales-call schedule; what is involved with the initial sales call? Is there a checklist? Photos taken? More interview questions? Notes on level of finish in current space? Impediments? Access challenges? Budget conversation? If you're a design/build company, this call would be your opportunity to discuss how your company operates in terms of the design vs. the build. This should also be laid out in a document you leave behind after the sales call; don't rely on a verbal explanation. When was the last time you reviewed such explanatory documents? Stick them on the flow chart and add them to the list of items to be reviewed.

Now back to the flow chart: What happens when the inquiry comes in via web/e-mail or phone? If everything goes through the AA, who is responsible for running the script or following up—the AA or the salesperson? Does your website have an automated process for responding to inquiries?

KINKS IN THE HOSE

As you work through your flow charts (and plan on this taking a day or two), you may find yourself documenting processes that look ripe for improvement. For example, the diagram in the upper right is what a kink in the hose looks like. When one person is responsible for suggesting or approving actions or making decisions, a whole process can get hung up if that person is unavailable. Some classic examples include field personnel calling the owner to get an answer, and the entire crew hanging around waiting for a response. Bookkeepers may be unable to send an invoice out the door until it has been reviewed (and usually massaged) by the owner. Bills may go unpaid because the owner hasn't gotten around to approving them.

When you see this kind of visual representation of too many decisions made by one key person, brainstorm how to cut down on the



degree of kink. Maybe the invoicing process has to be standardized so that once a fixed-price job is sold, the payment schedule is set and implemented by the bookkeeper. A standardized change-order process should keep things moving without input from the owner. If the job is sold T&M, there should be a similar process that's followed every time. Markups should be consistent, should reflect the profit requirements of the company, and should not be applied "depending" on the job or customer.

The fewer mini-decisions that have to be made, the more upper-level employees and owners are freed to manage the company at a higher level. If field crew continually ask for advice and solutions, it's time to empower the lead (or supervisor or foreman) to make decisions, assuming that person is competent. People don't grow into enlarged positions of responsibility until, or unless, they are trained to solve problems on their own, with diminishing amounts of support from "above." Maybe the bookkeeper should be authorized to pay bills up to a set amount, with authorization required on larger amounts. Be sure that you diagram all the internal checks, confirmations, authorizations, and Q&A interchanges.

LACK OF COLLABORATION

On the other hand, there may be situations in which 100% responsibility for a critical task should not be placed on a single individual. A case in point is estimating. There may be several links in the chain between identifying the requirements of a project, writing up the scope of work, estimating, and handing off to production. All too often, the estimator ends up coming up with the cost and

even the sale price of the job without conferring with production. Whenever possible, have estimating and production work collaboratively. For one thing, another set of eyes is always helpful. For another, there's no opportunity to play a blame game if both parties are involved.

WHAT CAN MAPPING ACHIEVE?

Here is a detailed rundown of what you want to achieve to effect real change in the company:

Review current practices to look for opportunities for improvement by reducing over-dependence on a single person (kinks in the hose); by identifying redundancies or overly complex practices (eliminate “middleman” scenarios); and by introducing collaboration to reduce error and expand team approaches.

Assess staffing requirements. If the economy will not support “business as usual” and you have to make the hard decision to let

people go or not bring them back, how can you reduce staff and still maintain coherent processes (reduce overcomplexities)? Review the flow chart to look for places to eliminate or re-route pathways.

If realistic staffing “post-COVID-19” doesn't support all the services you're currently providing, what is absolutely necessary for the continued survival of the company? Are you using as part of your sales pitch a recitation of services that perhaps you can no longer afford? A case in point might be companies selling T&M work who provide customers with copies of all purchase receipts plus time cards. This might involve scanning, copying, and otherwise collecting and transmitting stuff that may overwhelm your skeleton staff. Instead, consider making it known that job-related costs can be reviewed by appointment only during certain hours of the day.

If subcontractors have gotten used to being able to just drop by and pick up a check, or wheedle a check from the jobsite project manager, consider imposing limits on interruptions placed on your office staff. One way is to modify your subcontractor agreement (presumably you have one; if you don't, put that near the top of your list) to stipulate that bills received between the 1st and 15th of the month will be paid on the last day of the month, and bills received between the 16th and last day of the month will be paid on the 15th of the following month. That confines sub payments to two days a month, and time can be budgeted by the bookkeeper.

Generate realistic job descriptions. Avoid listing tasks in isolation, and use a flow chart to define a more global and integrated description that includes the “Why” and “For Whom” for the task. For example, instead of listing “enter job-related costs” as one of the bookkeeper's tasks, substitute “enter job-related costs within 48 hours in order to populate job-cost reports in a timely manner. Designated job-cost reports will be generated and e-mailed to the project manager every Friday afternoon before 3 p.m.” That puts the task in context and also identifies who is responsible for retrieving, viewing, analyzing, and possibly reporting on job status based on the reports.

Use the flow chart to identify who interacts with whom among the staff, and for what purposes. Be specific.

Review and improve existing forms and documents. Every document, spreadsheet, report, and the like that is part of the company's operations should be listed somewhere on the flow chart. It will be easy to see “holes” in the process that you need to fill in.

All documents and forms should be reviewed to determine if they are meeting the purpose for which they were designed. Also, everything stemming from your office should convey the same brand. Make sure addresses, logos, font, and color schemes are consistent.

Using flow charts to map business processes is time-consuming but it can teach you a lot about what's going on in your company now, plus point the way to making changes that will allow you to do what needs to be done but at a higher level of efficiency and, if need be, with fewer employees.

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