

Chapter 5

Efficiency

I was in 4-H. The county fair was coming up in about a month, and my dad was hounding me to get my calf, my 4-H project, trained to halter-lead. The judges look at how well you manage the animal – or whether, instead, the animal manages you.

I weighed probably 60 or 70 pounds. The last thing I wanted to do was have a tug of war with a 400-pound calf that had been running wild in the pasture most of the summer. I hated the thought of such an encounter: pulling on the calf's halter, trying to get the animal to come along, pulling, pulling, while the calf, oblivious to my commands, alternately stood rooted as a redwood, then plunged into me, stepping on my foot or knocking me down.

Trying to negotiate with a big animal is a humbling, frustrating experience. The animal wins – unless you come up with more brute force.

So I sat down and pondered how to train this calf without going through all the aggravation I'd endured in previous

years. Time was short, and I was looking for the most efficient way to get the job done.

I decided my solution might lie in our Allis-Chalmers WD45 tractor, which had a hand clutch. If you hook a belt or a rope on the clutch, you can put the tractor into gear and control it while standing on the ground. Pull the rope, which pulls the hand clutch, and the tractor goes forward.

So one day, when Dad was off on an errand, I went to the pasture and cornered my calf. I put a halter on him, tied him to the back of the Allis-Chalmers, and rigged the clutch with a rope. Then I jingled the choke chain under his halter. Of course, that meant nothing to him; he just stood there. I popped the clutch on the tractor. The tractor started up, the calf didn't, and the next thing we both knew, he was on his knees.

We repeated that set of steps a few times. I'd jingle the chain and pop the clutch. The tractor would jerk, the rope would snap taut. And the calf, standing one moment, would be on his knees the next, dragging behind the tractor.

Then, after two or three sessions, the calf made the connection between the sound of the jingle and the pull on the halter. At last, when I'd jingle the chain and pop the clutch, which tugged the rope, the calf would start walking. It didn't relate the brute force that overwhelmed it to the tractor; it related the brute force to me. And what ordinarily would take a month of training sessions was accomplished in but a few hours.

Laziness as a Virtue

I'm lazy. I'll do almost anything to avoid monotonous or repetitive tasks, like training a calf. And if I can't avoid them altogether, I'll look for ways to do them more easily and more quickly – more efficiently – than the usual way. Efficiency made bearable a tedious chore like training an obstinate calf.

In business, as on the farm, it also makes for greater productivity and, therefore, a better bottom line. My “laziness” has made me a better manager. As I develop procedures to enhance our efficiency, I delegate them to somebody else and go on creating solutions to other dilemmas.

Tweak Toward Excellence

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines efficiency as “the ratio of effective work to the energy expended in producing it.” The quest for efficiency is one of a manager’s primary jobs. You have to look at every aspect of your operation and ask the question: How can we make this more efficient? Honing your operation toward the best ratio of efficiency is a priority.

Consider Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, a married team of efficiency experts, who are considered pioneers in industrial-time-and-motion study. Their family life is the subject of the best-selling *Cheaper by the Dozen*, written by two of their 12 children, Frank, Jr., and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey.

As a bricklayer’s young helper, just out of high school, Gilbreth, much to the consternation of his foreman, took it upon himself to improve the process of laying bricks. He designed a scaffold that made him the fastest bricklayer.

The foreman duplicated his design for all the other bricklayers and suggested that he submit it to the Mechanics Institute, which awarded it a prize. When others adopted the same methodology, everyone, including the customer, benefited because bricklaying costs dropped.

Gilbreth went on to become a foreman, then a superintendent, then an independent contractor, building bridges and canals, factories and industrial towns. As he continued his quest for efficiency, he was often recruited to refine processes in the factories he helped build. By the time he was 27, he had offices in New York, Boston, and London.

I appreciate his obsession with efficiency. He even reduced the way he handled a bar of soap to a minimum number of moves so he could streamline his bathing. I draw the line short of that, but I do continue to look for ways in which we can enhance the efficiency of our operation. Here are some of the things I’ve learned.

Time and Money Best Spent

One big way to improve your operation, as Gilbreth did, is by looking at your largest expense and putting your first and best efforts toward making it as efficient and effective as possible.

At our company, it was production, so in earlier years, as manager of only a few employees, I attended to my production staff first. When they were at work, I thought production; everything else was subordinate to that concern. I was constantly in and out of the production room, making sure my workers were making the goods and adding value to the raw materials on a consistent basis, making the most of their time.

Meanwhile, I looked for ways to enhance their production with better machinery and improved procedures.

Focusing on the biggest expense is an example of industrial triage. This ingenious concept arose from the bloody battlefields of the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), when French physicians realized that indiscriminately trying to treat all the injured, regardless of the seriousness of their injuries, cost the lives of many soldiers who would have survived had they been treated sooner.

Out of this crisis came a process of setting medical priorities: triage. Patients were sorted according to whether they would survive with or without treatment. Those who would survive only with intervention were treated first. Those who were going to survive, even without intervention, were put on the waiting list. Those who were going to die, no matter what the intervention, were simply made comfortable.

Transferring that dilemma to a business, the question becomes: What is the most pressing concern, the one on which a manager should concentrate time and money? Don't waste energy on problems that solve themselves. Don't waste energy on projects that will fail anyway. Indeed, perhaps the biggest challenge a manager faces is to determine what will live and what will die, with and without intervention.

Obviously, this is about setting priorities. What most needs attention? What can be delegated? What can be put off until later? What can be ignored altogether? Most managers tend to focus on urgent rather than vital concerns. Let Mr. Hobbs explain.

Charles R. Hobbs, in an excellent series called *Your Time and Your Life*, unfortunately out of print, used a simple matrix to explain our choices. He suggested that events, situations, and goals in our lives be divided into four categories:

- Vital and urgent, such as responding to an emergency call from home;
- Not vital but urgent, such as answering an insistently ringing telephone;
- Vital but not urgent, such as planning a business expansion;
- Not vital and not urgent, such as cleaning out the supply room.

That which is vital has a high payoff, says Mr. Hobbs, and it is to vital issues and projects we should devote our attention; instead, he points out, it is urgency that more often spurs us to action.

The “ideal” category is “vital but not urgent,” what produces success and gives us satisfaction. In setting priorities, keeping the long view in mind will help us shift into that ideal arena, and careful planning will help us do what we need to do toward our priorities in time to avoid the stomach-churning sense of urgency.

Roger Merrill, in his book *Connections*, looks from another perspective at how we should allocate our resources. He suggests we fail at being effective and efficient by not distinguishing between those things that concern us, world hunger, perhaps, and those on which we can have a real and direct effect, such as supporting a local homeless shelter.

Two concentric circles illustrate his point. One, the circle of concern, encompasses all the things on our mind and needing attention – by someone. Inside the circle of concern is a much smaller circle of influence, which comprises only issues for which we actually can make a difference.

Everyone’s circle of influence is different, depending upon interests, aptitudes, abilities, and resources. Successful people pick carefully what they’re going to do, focusing their efforts where they think they have the greatest chance of success: within their circle of influence.

Thrashing about in a circle of concern, where issues are beyond our control, dilutes our effort and wastes our resources. The result of all our work is disproportionately small. In contrast, we can accomplish much more if we focus on issues within our circle of influence. There, where our capability lies, we get the most for our efforts; we do the most good.

Focus

Focus on what you do best. You should be continually grooming and building on your core of abilities. Rather than try to develop something extraneous to your innate abilities, zero in on your talents and develop them.

My core was business understanding and development, how to supervise people, and other associated topics. I kept working on that core. I didn't go off and take a course in geology, or something like that, although in many cases I was tempted.

Delegate! Delegate! Delegate!

I once met an old couple who had been married 60 years. I asked the husband, "How have you succeeded in your marriage?" He replied...

(Chapter finished in final book)