



Trusted Advisor to Business Owners

## We Can't Just Wing It Anymore

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**Right now people have a “wing it” attitude. If there’s a problem, people jump to help, which is both good and bad, but some people say it feels like there’s a lack of clarity, who does what, no agreement on how things get done, and no clear chain of command. There seems to be inadequate communication, and a lack of responsibility or accountability. We need more structure in operations. Help!**

**Thoughts of the Day:** Operations is the guts of the business. Putting process, job descriptions, and accountabilities in place can help make things smoother. Figure out who heads up operations, preferably not the owner. Build a team to work on the best way to handle routine workload as well as exceptions. Make it clear the routine clear enough so a new person could easily learn most of what they need to know from a chart and back up descriptions.

Operations is where everything comes together. Orders from customers have to get delivered on time, in budget. Lack of planning often creates a lot of problems in operations. Things run smoother when everyone in the company takes the time to talk about workflow, defining what’s routine and what needs special handling. Departments need to layout/diagram how work flows through their department, and if they work on a variety of things, which typically happens, ask them to make multiple diagrams.

Look for interruptions and exceptions in the work flow drawing. Don’t try to define everything, you can’t solve all the

company’s problems overnight, and you shouldn’t try to. Instead indicate where someone goes to get clarification if things don’t go according to plan.

Ask everyone in operations to submit a list of the things they do daily, weekly, monthly. If 2 people do the same job, ask both to submit their lists. You’d be surprised how many differences there may be as one person remembers one thing, another something else.

Ask managers to review the lists and then compile the lists into job descriptions. You can also look online for standard job descriptions and salary ranges to help move the process along.

Make sure that each job description includes a list of accountabilities. These are the standards to which people are expected to deliver. What is most important in your organization? Is it speed, accuracy, price cuts, whatever the customer needs?

You need to clarify your expectations, and document them. Ensure employee responsibility by distributing the job expectations and discussing. If there are grey areas, try your best to clear them up and make your expectations concrete.

Assign someone to be in charge of operations. It’s best if this is a person is available throughout the day to field questions, deal with obstacles, and generally oversee and assist people. Make it clear to everyone that this person is in charge and has your full support.

If you're like most business owners, when there's a problem in operations you stand ready to step in and head it off, or deal directly with the person who caused the problem. Build a chain of command and support them in their decisions, resist temptation to do it all yourself.

Start with the manager in charge, making sure they're aware there's a problem. Give them time to do some homework, if necessary, and ask for a report back to you. Use your time together to listen, provide direction and teach. Asking them to solve the problem allows your employees to take responsibility and prevent the issue from recurring.

If there is a recurring problem, form a work group. Ask the group to tackle the problem and identify a more permanent solution. Resist the temptation to get involved directly, unless they ask for your input. The goal is to build a team that learns to solve problems without your involvement.

Give everyone the goal of having a well documented, error free operation. Each time a problem surfaces, treat it as an opportunity to strengthen your processes by fixing the hole that led to the occurrence. Check that instructions on how to do things are clearly written and shared with new employees. Ask new employees to make notes anytime procedures are unclear, and update the procedures for the

next person. Several rounds of teaching people what's expected, and recognizing the improvement should lead to a near-error free, well documented operation!

*Looking for a good book? Operations Management: the Art & Science of Making Things Happen, by James T.H. Cooke*

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