



The Power of Completed Staff Work

By Stephen R. Covey

©2004 FranklinCovey Co.

Over the years I have talked to tens of thousands of executives, secretaries, managers and professionals who say that their greatest challenge is not being able to get everything done with the time and resources they have.

Given the average person's struggle, can you imagine what it must be like for a secretary of state or a minister of foreign affairs? The demands are unbelievable _ working at all hours of the night, attending meetings across the world, seeking understanding, negotiating and making decisions that impact entire nations. How on earth do they manage?

Years ago I learned something very important from the example of Henry Kissinger, a lesson that I believe can be applied by anyone in any position. When serving as secretary of state in the Nixon and Ford administrations, Kissinger instilled a principle known as "completed staff work," a concept which I think is the key to managing high demands, developing effectiveness in yourself and in others, and getting it right.

Simply, completed staff work requires individuals to give their best thinking, their best recommendations and ultimately their best work.

When given a recommendation from his staff, Kissinger routinely asked: "Is this the very best you can do?"

Often his staff replied, "Well, no. We could strengthen our recommendation with more analysis and detail."

After they'd reworked it and resubmitted it, Kissinger would again challenge his team: "Is this your very best recommendation? Is there any room for improvement?"

Of course, the team always found ways to correct and improve their recommendation. With added responsibility for their best thinking and judgment, they would deliver their final recommendation and be able to say, "We have been absolutely thorough with our thinking, clearly identifying the alternatives, an action plan and the end results."

Kissinger then replied, "Good, now I'll read it."

Clearly he understood that, if he wisely delegated important responsibilities to his staff and empowered them to perform their completed staff work, they would fulfill their highest potential and make a greater contribution.

Unfortunately many in the workplace have not learned to trust the principles of delegation and empowerment. They take it all on themselves, convinced that only they themselves can do it right. Ultimately they burn out, and meanwhile the organization reaps only marginal thinking and marginal results.

Consider your job situation and all its demands and pressures to get things done right. Ask yourself how you can begin to delegate and empower others through the principle of completed staff work, and apply the following concepts for greater effectiveness and efficiency.

1. Know What You Want, And Say So.

Establish a definite understanding of desired results, a psychological contract stating clear expectations, between yourself and those you lead and supervise. Help employees to understand that they will be called upon to give their best thinking in solving problems,

making decisions and formulating recommendations. Identify criteria to be included in recommendations.

2. Ask Questions.

As a manager or co-worker, ask staff members, "What is your recommendation? How would you solve this problem or how would you implement this policy?" Get in the habit of soliciting ideas and buy-in _ psychological investment in the successful outcome of your project _ from others.

Be careful, however, to give credit and recognition to others for their contributions. Otherwise you will seem to be exploiting others and their best thinking for your own recognition or benefit.

3. Clarify Assumptions.

When working with others as a supervisor, supervisee or co-worker, remember to clarify all parties' assumptions as to the premise of the work, the required format, the criteria, the timelines and so forth. Often different assumptions can lead people to go off on different tracks, resulting in frustration and loss of buy-in.

4. Give People The Tools They Need.

Provide necessary resources, time and access to information. Nothing is more frustrating to people than to be expected to do completed staff work without the necessary information and resources. Be accessible when necessary to give information and feedback.

5. Provide A Setting For Success.

Schedule a time for presentation and review of the completed staff work. Give people a chance to make an effective presentation of their work. Respectfully ask questions with positive feedback before recommending improvements and identifying next steps.

The principle of completed staff work is not a panacea. It's simply an effective means of teaching people to do their own thinking and put their best work forward. My experience is that most people welcome the chance to study things out and to show what they are capable of.

If executed well, completed staff work saves everybody's time in the long run and produces higher-quality results by tapping into people's talents and potential.