



## Take time to clear the organizational clutter away from your business

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Recently, I took advantage of some downtime to review my project portfolio from the past year to determine what lessons I could learn. While I was at it, I decided to go through my archive of the past 30 years. It's amazing what you find when you rummage through the cobwebs of your past. As I was skimming through the materials, I came across a handout I received the first week I went to work at Lockheed entitled, Basic Operating Rules of the Lockheed 'Skunk Works.' The rules can be summarized as follows: get a small group of good people, give them the authority and accountability to do the job and get the hell out of their way. Looking it over, I wondered why businesses seem to eventually fall into a bureaucratic morass.

To me, it appears about every five to seven years departments need major overhauling, as they've grown thick with procedures and organizational dogma that few can remember the reasons. These impede the business in its ability to operate or compete.

With that insight in mind, I made another connection: these rules were developed by an engineer/project manager not a project manager/engineer. I could trace many of the rules and the reasons for them back to the simple laws of thermodynamics. Is project management really an exercise in human conservation of energy?

This link reminded me of a book I read several years ago, *The Entropy Vector*, that connected science to business and had as its premise that businesses like all things in the universe are destined to fall into chaos and disorder.

If this is indeed true, then management consulting, project management, process reengineering, and the whole host of other business initiatives that periodically invade our humble cubicles, are attempts to fight the laws of thermodynamics or at least postpone their effects for another cycle.

So when a methods engineer (a.k.a. process geek) like myself turns up, it becomes an opportunity to do spring cleaning, clear out the organizational clutter that has been getting in your way of really creating something amazing.

This relates to a lesson I've been trying to teach my youngest son Austin. Entropy works against you daily; as such you need to invest a little time daily to combat it. It's not just the physical stuff on the floor or your desk. Clutter happens in your business, your projects, and even in between your ears. During my time at Rockwell and Lockheed, manufacturing operations had a small group of crazies like me charged with trying to improve the work life of others.

At Rockwell I pieced together a small system with a now defunct CAD/CAM vendor connecting their minicomputer system to a corporate mainframe, in essence turning it into a giant file server with an index. The system was primitive by today's standards, however, it was extensively used.

When I moved to Lockheed, I recreated much of the same system using another CAD/CAM package and a mainframe only with more end user control added to the front end. This too was extensively used, much to the surprise of the IT department, whose previous attempts to accomplish the same task had failed.

When the IT Director at Lockheed and I sat down one day to discuss renewing my consulting contract, I was surprised to learn that my systems were used three times more any other system deployment in department history. Throughout our meeting she kept trying to pin down just what I had done to get a bunch of engineering and manufacturing guys — who in her opinion couldn't agree on the time of day — to use it and ask for more from the IT department.

My answer was rather simplistic. I simply asked engineers on both sides — design and manufacturing — what would help them daily in doing their jobs and tried to provide it without the technology, policies and procedures getting in the way. Simply put, I followed the Skunk Work rules in implementing solutions.

I avoided creating a lot of bureaucratic positions around my CAD/CAM system and added menus and program routines that made it simple and easy to store and retrieve files, ship CAD/CAM models to other places, and plot them out without other people having to get involved. I removed the tedium of creating backups — the system did it for everyone twice a day — and recovery was easy without the need for a written request to search the archives or get a system programmer to schedule a tape mount and search. They simply filled out an on-line menu and it would search an index to locate which tape to restore from and signal the system operator to mount the tape.

Which brings us back to where we started. The question I have for you is this: Has your company or department taken a serious look at the clutter around your business lately? Has entropy become an all too familiar friend that's tolerated until it bleeds time and profits, and you're in crisis mode? Have you taken a moment to think how this happened?

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**Originally Published in Advanced Manufacturing Magazine May/June, 2007**