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Professional Development: Doctrine of Completed Staffwork

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1. Completed staff work is the study of a problem and the presentation of a solution by a staff member, in such form that all that remains to be done on the part of the head of the staff division is to indicate his or her approval or disapproval of the completed action.

- **Complete Solution**. The more difficult the problem is, the greater the tendency is to present the problem to the superior in piecemeal fashion. It is your job as the staff member assigned to a particular task to (a) consider all the alternatives and the implications of such action on various constituencies (pros and cons), policies and budgets (b) research the details and (c) present your recommended position for action.
- **Attention to Detail and Concentration.** Concentration is "sequential attention to detail." Attention to detail is essential. Great staff members, like great athletes create and use "checklists" in their minds. When the time comes to do a skill, they think sequentially according to that list -- one step at a time in the order each step occurs, leaving no detail forgotten. Carefully think through your project, one element at a time.
- **Seeking Advice**. In reaching your recommendations you may need to consult with other individuals, peers, your staff, other agencies, and even the superior if necessary, in order to obtain the information needed to determine the appropriate course of action. You should do this by scheduling a meeting and coming prepared with well thought out questions and ideas – not a blank slate with just the problem on the table. Never conduct a blank slate “brainstorming session” when you have been given a specific assignment. Coming to a meeting with detailed questions and any data that you have produced because you’ve done your homework will help others help you. “Seeking advice” does not imply asking your superiors to solve the problem, but does include seeking a different perspective or information based upon the larger experience base of the superior.
- **Assessing Political Sensitivities**. Political sensitivities must be considered in solving any problem. Therefore, you must ask yourself the questions, “Will solving this problem in a certain way upset anyone?”, “Are there any organizations or people within my organization that think it is their role to resolve or address this issue and what is our relationship with such organizations or people?” and “Are there experts on this problem who would be upset if I didn’t consult

them."

- **Working Draft**. Before seeking advice or assessing sensitivity, create a working draft that includes (a) statement of the problem, (b) existing policy/resources addressing the problem, (c) possible solutions with pros and cons for each and (d) considerations re: possible political sensitivities.
- **Final Draft**. The staff member's final work product, whether it involves the pronouncement of a new policy or the revision of an established policy, should, when presented to the "supervisor" for approval or disapproval, be worked out in finished form even if it is presented to the supervisor as a draft. "Draft" does not mean "incomplete". Rather, it should be the staff member's best effort at a finished product to date.

2. Resist the impulse, which often comes to the inexperienced staff member, to ask your supervisor what to do, no matter how difficult the problem.

- **Mental Frustration**. A feeling of mental frustration is common when confronting any new problem. That's why you are working on it. You are trying to solve it. Think of it as the beginning of a puzzle. There are 500 pieces on the table and they don't look like the picture on the box. Even if you think it is easy to ask the supervisor what to do, and it appears so easy for your supervisor to answer. Resist that impulse. You will succumb to it only if you do not know your job. It is your job to advise your superior what he or she ought to do. If you think it is "impossible" or think you cannot do it, it will be impossible. Don't ever let yourself think or say the words "impossible" or "I can't". Try not to use the word "but" either. "But" always prefaces an excuse why you can't! Great staff members, like great athletes, always say, "why not" or "I can do this."
- **Accept the Challenge**. Great staff members are like great players during practice sessions -- envisioning themselves in the most difficult and challenging situations. Great players want to be at bat or taking the final shot when the game is at stake. They don't avoid the tough situation. They know that challenges make them better and require them to step up to the next level of performance.
- **Answers and Questions**. Your supervisor needs answers, not questions. But every answer must start with a question. So, begin by writing out all the questions you have and do your best at answering the questions before asking anyone for help. Think of yourself as a detective.
- **Repetition = Excellence**. Your job is to study, write, restudy and rewrite until you have evolved a single proposed action – the best alternative. One try does not produce a solution. Expect to write and rewrite. Your product will get better every time you look at it and work on it. If you want to be a great writer; write a thousand pages. If you want to have a great tennis forehand; hit 10,000 forehands. If you want a great curve ball; throw 10,000 curveballs. People who are great at what they do always count repetitions; never the amount of time they spend at practice.
- **Check Before Final Rewrite**. This does not exclude checking with the supervisor after you have decided what action to take and have a "close to final" draft and proposed solution, letter or policy. It's okay to get the supervisor on board at this point to save time and effort later, both yours and that of your supervisor. Feel free to present a final draft and to ask about preference in emphasis, nuance or phraseology. But this is an issue of presentation rather than solution. In some politically sensitive projects, the manner of presentation may be as important as the decision itself.
- **Including Other Departments or Organizations**. If a decision or solution involves other agencies, the supervisor may need to suggest strategies for including those individuals at the

proper point to gain their needed support. The staff member asking about this should point out what departments or agencies should be considered with regard to consultation and should suggest appropriate strategies to be utilized.

3. Do not waste your time or the time of your supervisor by producing long explanations, updates or memoranda.

- **Finished product**. Writing a memorandum to your supervisor does not constitute completed staff work, but writing a memorandum for him or her to send to someone else does.
- **How Do You Know You Have "Finished Product"?** Your views should be placed before your supervisor in finished form so that your supervisor can make your recommendations his or her recommendations simply by signing his or her name to the document.
- **Single Document with Brief Rationale.** In most instances, completed staff work results in a single document prepared for the signature of the supervisor, with only a brief accompanying rationale, comment, or in many cases no additional comment. However, do not hesitate to point out certain points that very well might be provocative or result in a reaction of other individuals. Let your supervisor know where the controversial points are so that your supervisor can prepare to deal with reactions to change.

4. The theory of completed staff work does not preclude a "rough draft." In fact, such a draft often gives the superior an opportunity to add his or her own "personal touch" to communiqués.

- **Complete Work**. A "rough draft" is not the presentation of a 'half-baked' idea. The rough draft must be complete in every respect except that it lacks the requisite number of copies and need not be overly neat. A rough draft must not be used as an excuse for shifting to the supervisor the burden of formulating the action.
- **Feedback of Supervisor**. The supervisor should provide the staff member with a corrected copy of the final product so that the staff member can review the supervisor's corrections and additions toward the end of gaining an increased feel for the supervisor's style as well as content. Such knowledge will greatly help in future staff work. Writing style and presentation sequence are something that a staff member must learn about the supervisor in order to do staff work effectively.
- **Accept Criticism**. Remember that criticism is constructive feedback. Criticism is someone saying that your work could be better not that you are not a good person or a person not capable of great work.
- **Be Your Own Best Critic**. Great players always look inward to see what they could have done differently to have prevented a loss or an error. They never blame someone else on their team or look for excuses. Great players and great staff members accept responsibility for their work. Be self critical!

5. Time deadlines are essential in completing staff work.

- **Deadlines Are Essential.** Don't accept an assignment without a clear indication from your superior of the urgency of the issue. If it must be done today, then information collection may be limited. If you have time, use time wisely to do a better job. Don't procrastinate!
- **Feedback Deadlines**. If you are going to present a draft of the document, give your supervisor

enough time to edit and get it back to you so you can still complete the task within the final deadline. So be sure to give your supervisor a deadline for the return of any draft.

- **What If You Think You Can't Meet A Deadline?** Tell your supervisor immediately as soon as you see that other priorities may result in you not meeting an assigned deadline. Give your supervisor the chance to reorder your priorities to help you meet a deadline or to change the deadline. Never go to your supervisor the day something is due and ask for an extension! That only tells your supervisor that you didn't start working on it until the last minute.

6. Complete really means complete!

- **Include All Parts of the Solution.** If the communiqué is to be sent to higher authorities or other staff members for review, draft a transmittal letter to accompany your work product and provide the addresses of individuals who are to receive the communication. Have any attachments included with the draft as well as any original correspondence on the topic. If the draft refers to other documents (Regent's Rules, State Law) include a copy of the pertinent sections with the draft so that the supervisor will not have to scramble to obtain the information needed for review.
- **Perfection**. Perfection in the performance of an assigned task is possible. Most players have experienced "the perfect shot", "the perfect swing" or "the perfect fake" at some moment in their careers. While perfection doesn't occur frequently, it seldom occurs if you don't try for it. If you try to give your best effort every time you do something and don't quite achieve it, the result will be twice that of the person who didn't give their best. Strive for perfection in the preparation of all work product!
- **Anticipation is Critical.** Anticipate the work the supervisor is going to have to do to complete this task and prepare as much of it as you can for him or her. Your job is to facilitate the supervisor's efforts as he or she undertakes this project. Whatever you can do to help achieve this outcome, do it for your supervisor and present it as part of your assignment.
- **Have Information With You for Meetings.** Bring your complete folder on the project if you are having a meeting with your supervisor on the assignment so you don't have to run out of the room to get a requested document.

7. The "completed staff work" theory may result in more work for the staff member, but it results in more freedom for the superior. This is as it should be.

- **Time is Money**. Since the supervisor is getting paid more than you are, when you save time for the supervisor you are saving money for the organization. Protect your supervisor from half-baked ideas, voluminous memoranda, and inadequate oral presentations by not doing these things.
- **Best Advice from Best Place**. Completed staff work provides the supervisor with the best advice from the level where the expertise should be the best…the people and resources you went to for information and ideas on solutions to the problem.
- **Getting the Supervisor to Do What You Want**. The staff member who has a good idea or solution is more likely to get the problem solved the way the staff member wants it solved if the idea is laid out, ready to go, all thought out, including the draft presentation approach.

8. When you have finished your "completed staff work" the final test is this: If you were the supervisor, would you be willing to sign the paper you have prepared, and stake your professional reputation on it being right?

- If the answer is in the negative take it back and work it over, because it is not yet completed staff work.

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