

Effective and Meaningful Jobs

Sustain Profits, Growth and Enthusiasm

Most of us work in organizations with structures like Figure 1. Our companies have Staff people to gather data and submit reports, Line people to produce results, and Managers to make decisions and issue orders. This division of labor seems logical enough and is consistent with using hierarchical system design methods to organize a group of people to accomplish an objective.

However, the *staff/line/management* structure is far less effective in practice than we expect it to be. People become unsatisfied or frustrated and sooner or later gum-up the works. Staff people have opinions about what their data means, so they filter it to predetermine the manager's decision. Managers, frustrated with their lack of choices from the "data" and with "faulty execution" by line people, ignore data and follow their biases, over-define how to execute their orders, go out and do it themselves, or absorb themselves in something unrelated to their job, like golf or a three-martini lunch. Line people disagree with or resent management's orders because, as they see it, management clearly is out of touch with reality. They execute poorly or do what they believe is right.

We all need effective and meaningful work to remain productive and enthused. We have an intrinsic need to observe, judge, and act about things that are important to us. We are not by nature impartial observers, detached judges, or unthinking robots. We are creative and holistic. When we are in an incomplete job, either we modify it to produce the wholeness we need or we become frustrated and ineffective.

I first learned the value of living the entire "observe, judge, act" process when involved with a church-related movement some 25 years ago. My wife and I teamed up with six other couples and studied, discussed, decided, and acted on social issues in our community. We learned to avoid mere discussion and self-righteous judgments about what other people should do. *"I was Hungry, and you*

"I was hungry, and you formed a discussion group"

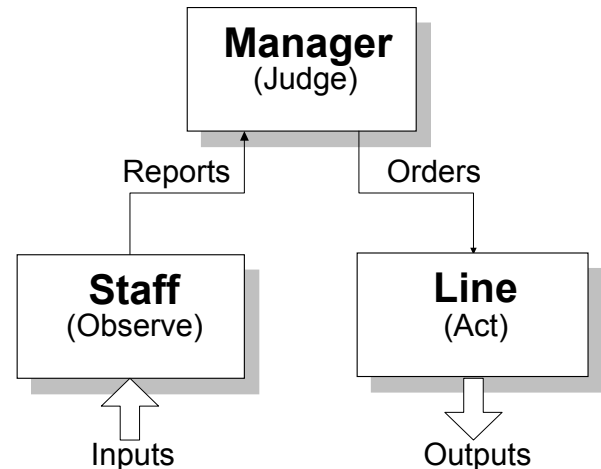


Fig. 1: The traditional division of work into Staff jobs (to observe), Line jobs (to act) and Management jobs (to judge).

formed a discussion group" was an ironic slogan that moved us to personal decisions and meaningful, personal actions.

We learned from our actions that a healthy and enriching participation in life is a four-step process: observe, judge, act, and repent (See Fig. 2). At first we observed and analyzed an issue from a detached perspective. But once we took action we were no longer detached, we were viscerally involved, we were responsible! Personal action also brought a new perspective, creative repentance: the commitment to change ourselves as part of the real solution. This process of full involvement increased our enthusiasm and improved our observations, judgments, and actions.

Start-ups create healthy jobs

In Pro-Log's early years our jobs were holistic by necessity and we were enthusiastic and effective. There were few of us, we were under-organized, and everyone wore many hats. For example, although I was CEO, I made account calls, negotiated agreements, trained customers, and set up the field sales

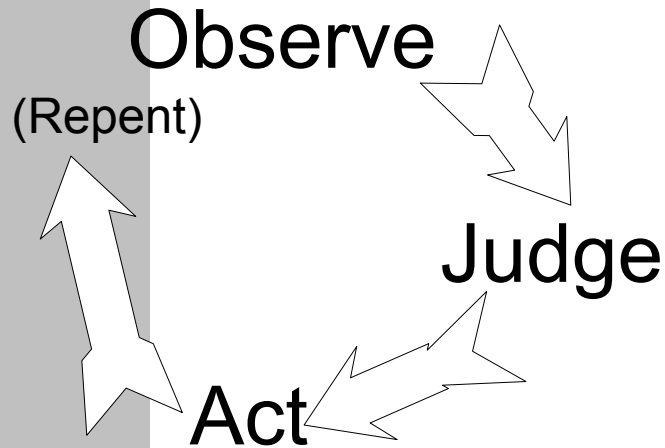


Fig. 2: The repeating cycle of a healthy human activity: Observe (objectively), Judge, Act, and Repent (creatively).

"I was your unhappy customer, and you conducted a market survey"

organization. I knew our key customers, manufacturers representatives, and distributors personally, and knew what it was about our products and selling system that worked. But after 5 years of consistent profits and solid growth, I "had to" withdraw from the field to concentrate on managing the company. I hired the first in a series of sales executives to manage our selling systems and to deal with our customers.

Year after year we discussed our customers in executive planning meetings. But they became impersonal abstractions to me and hypothetical caricatures to the executives who had never seen a customer in his native habitat. We made decisions based on third hand information (and on my fading memories of how customers "were"). Since other people enacted our decisions, we had no cause to repent. It took three years of this management isolation to slow the company's growth and reduce its profitability. It took another two years before growth halted and the P&L took a nosedive.

Executive rejuvenation

In 1986 I launched an *executive involvement* program. Each of us had to understand thoroughly three key customers, one vendor, and one outside sales organization on a one-to-one, interactive, ongoing basis. We had to visit our assigned companies at least once every six months to know their decision makers personally and to learn who their customers were, what their plans were, how we could help them, and how they could help us.

My first trips to the field were a revelation. Among other things, I discovered that our customers had changed their expectations, wants, and needs. They had moved beyond what I remembered and we had fallen behind. Our CFO returned from his field trips to champion new, more friendly, and flexible financial arrangements that quickly became significant selling assets.

Once we individually involved ourselves with the customers, employees, vendors, competitors, and sales organizations we so frequently discussed and made decisions about, we found our jobs more satisfying and our decisions more effective.

The alternative to effective and meaningful jobs is to embrace these mottoes:

"I was your frustrated employee, and you formed a Human Resources department,"

"I was your unhappy customer, and you conducted a market survey."

"I was your investor, and you went out of business."

Edwin Lee

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