

THE DANGER OF WORKAROUNDS

Decisions can be very difficult to manage in settings where people aren't used to accepting responsibility – or where the structure works against it. Position accountability (what the position is accountable for) and responsibility (what the person actually can do) can get wildly out of synch. This occurs often in public agencies, and often is due to what we call “nichifying.”

For botanists, biologists, and other scientists, the idea of “nichifying” is central to understanding how evolution works. Plants and animals are in a constant struggle to find and occupy the safest and easiest niche for their survival. As the climate changes, for example, plants move to wetter or drier ground. As predators become more prevalent, animals move to less dangerous territory.

Within organizations, people “nichify” as well. When it's positive, people seek niches where their talent is valued, they feel productive, where they feel they can best contribute. In these cases, nichifying works to the organization's advantage.

But nichifying has a negative side. It shows up in bureaucracies in the form of “workarounds” – instances where people do the work someone else is responsible for, typically because they do it better or enjoy it more. People will say: “Well, if you really want to get that done, you have to see Dorothy in Accounting. Even though she's not in charge of Procurement, everything passes through her.”

Public agencies are prone to “nichifying” because civil service rules prevent people from moving easily to find their best niche. Work responsibilities flow toward people with the skills to do the work, not necessarily the people in the appropriate roles. Workarounds result in “shadow organizations” – an informal organization on top of the formal one you see on paper. Where “shadow organizations” have been allowed to flourish, the result is confusion about roles and responsibilities as well as convoluted decision making.

For example, financial decisions at one California state agency were divided between three departments. Accounts Receivable and Payable were under the Finance Department. The Operations Department handled capital expenditures. And the Department of Planning dealt with budgets, planning and sophisticated financing. People within the organization understood who did what – but no one was accountable for financial performance. No surprise, then, that this agency had very poor financial performance overall.

What can you do to manage decisions well in such a setting? For one thing, you can spend extra time with people, building trust and support for changing the work processes. You can fight to put people where their talents can best be aligned with their real job responsibilities. You can also continually look for opportunities to recruit and promote talented people in the organization. Otherwise, the talented people are likely to leave – triggering further bureaucracy.