

FACT SHEET

COMPLETED STAFF WORK DOCTRINE

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Successful top level executives, mid-managers, supervisors and staff officials in agribusiness and other organizations constantly seek ways to maximize use of their time and to enrich their jobs. The larger and more complex an organization becomes, the more essential it is that executives master the art of executive-ship. Among the many techniques which effective executives must practice, the proper use of staff personnel seems to offer the highest potential for improving management in most organizations. The doctrine of completed staff work explains this technique.

The material which follows is adapted from a doctrine of completed staff work developed by Colonel Archer L. Lerch in 1942. This doctrine has been tested in all types of organizations since that time and is as valid today as it was then.

- Completed staff work is the study of a problem and the presentation of a solution by a staff official, or a staff committee, in such form that all that remains to be done on the part of the head of the staff division, or the top official, is to indicate his approval or disapproval of the completed action. The words "completed action" should be emphasized, because the more difficult and complex the problem is, the stronger is the tendency to present the problem to the top executive in piecemeal fashion. However, it is the staff official's duty to work out the details. He should not consult his superior in the determination of those details, no matter how perplexing they may be. He may and should consult other staff officials. The product, whether it announces a new policy or affects an

established one, should be worked out in finished form and presented to the superior for approval or disapproval.

- The impulse of the inexperienced staff official to ask his superior what to do occurs more often when the problem is difficult. Despite his feeling of frustration, he should resist the impulse to go to the top official for his answers. It is the staff official's job to advise the executive what he ought to do, not to ask him. The superior needs answers, not questions. The staff official's job is to study, write, restudy and rewrite until he has formulated a single proposed action — the best one of all considered. The superior merely approves or disapproves.
- The staff official should not worry his superior with long explanations and memoranda. Writing a memorandum to the executive does not constitute completed staff work, but writing a memorandum for the executive to send to someone else does. The staff official's views should be presented in finished form so that the superior can make them his views simply by signing his name. In many instances, completed staff work results in a single document prepared for the signature of the top executive, without accompanying comment. If the proper result is achieved, the superior will usually recognize it at once. If he wants comment or explanation, he will ask for it.
- The theory of completed staff work does not preclude a "rough draft," but the rough draft must not be an underdeveloped idea. It must be complete in every respect except that it lacks the requisite number of copies and ordinarily it need not be perfectly neat. However, a rough

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draft must not be used as an excuse for shifting to the superior the burden for formulating the action. Inaccurate or hastily prepared material lacking concise, specific, workable recommendations must never be submitted to the superior.

- The completed staff work theory may result in more work for the staff official, but it also results in more freedom for the superior. This is as it should be.
- When the staff official has finished his assignment, the final test is this: If he were the

superior, would he be willing to sign the paper and stake his professional reputation on its correctness? If the answer is negative, it is not completed staff work.

Executives who require subordinates to practice completed staff work find that they have more time to devote to planning and other high level work. An equally important benefit is that the subordinates develop administrative skills. The usual result is that when the staff official becomes a top executive, he will require completed staff work on the part of those serving him as staff members.

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