The Graffiti Problem

"For every problem, economists have an answer. Simple, neat and wrong."
- H. L. Mencken

"Time is God's way of making sure everything doesn't happen at once."

"Production management, that's my biz;
Computers, algorithms, I'm a wiz.
Of nifty jobs I'll have my choice,
Just hope they contain a human voice."
- On-the-wall commentary by Wharton MBA candidates.

The Graffiti Solution
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Graffiti is regarded by many as a blight on our cities because it contributes to visual pollution. City governments spend vast sums in an effort to clean the ubiquitous graffiti from urban walls. I suggest that the "cleansing strategy" is an expensive, ineffective way of dealing with the problem; well-known management techniques can solve the problem more efficiently.

First, we must understand the current situation. Graffiti is produced by entrepreneurs, often with the help of only a few partners. The graffiti firms have low overhead and keep abreast of the latest technology. Decisions within the firms are made democratically. The rewards stems from the job itself; a good graffito commands the respect of his peers. Peer group support is strengthened because outsiders try to punish graffiti entrepreneurs and destroy some of the best graffiti. The cleansing strategy represents an attack on the graffiti worker's values and only intensifies the search for new technology and for placement of graffiti in more inaccessible locations. Thus, the more a city spends on cleaning and punishment, the greater the production of graffiti.

The solution to this escalating problem is simple: use the techniques to motivate people that organizations have spent years perfecting. Unfortunately for organizations, many of these techniques have had the effect of *de*motivating rather than motivating. The graffiti problem, however, offers an opportunity to take advantage of our vast knowledge about demotivation and to use it in a positive way.

The basic strategy behind demotivation is to remove responsibility from the individual. Responsibility, once removed from the individual, is vested in "bosses." As we know, the person who is relieved of responsibility becomes an irresponsible person. The solution to the graffiti problem lies in the large pool of irresponsibility available to us.

First, positions for graffiti workers should be advertised. The pay should be set at a rate that is high enough to attract far more applicants than needed.

Irrelevant qualifications should then be created to select graffiti workers from the pool. For example, a rule could be made to hire only people who have at least a college education. Or the rule could be reversed to say that no one with a college education can be hired. These arbitrary qualifications would create antagonism among those applicants not hired.

What would the effect of hiring graffiti workers using irrelevant criteria? Those who were not hired will see the injustice of the system. They will ask themselves why they should produce graffiti for nothing when others, who are no better qualified, are paid to do the job. The malcontents will stop producing their part of the overall graffiti output.

The rest of the solution is simple. First, the position of "boss" is created. "Bosses" are paid more; in return, they are not allowed to do any graffiti work themselves. This also reduces the graffiti output.

This "boss strategy" could be extended until there were only bosses (a solution that has been effectively used by some government agencies). Such a strategy is unnecessary, however. The boss strategy is a synergistic one so that for each boss position the work output decreases for each of the remaining workers.

Additional synergy is gained by creating "bosses of bosses," "bosses of bosses of bosses" and so on up to perhaps 10 levels. It is hypothesized that the greater the levels of bosses created, the more the work decreases.

Graffiti output can be reduced still further of the bosses are trained to create an authoritarian environment. Some tactics are of special importance; 1) Each boss should unilaterally decide to impose wage incentive standards on graffiti. These standards would pay a given amount for each square foot of graffiti. 2) Quality inspectors should be hired to ensure that payment is made only for satisfactory work. 3) Industrial engineers should be hired to ensure that the standards are fair to everyone in the opinion of the bosses. Both quality inspectors and industrial engineers can be drawn from the graffiti worker pool to further reduce the number of workers. 4) All graffiti ideas must be approved by bosses.

Workers would help to create an authoritarian environment. They would form a union and also staff it with bosses, further depleting the number of workers, and increasing the level of "felt irresponsibility" among the workers.

The total abolition of graffiti is then close at hand. All that remains is for bosses to unilaterally take the following steps:

1) Tighten standards to get more work out of each of the graffiti workers without an increase in pay.
2) Announce that, due to the high cost of graffiti production, most of the production will be moved from urban to rural areas, where space is cheaper – and from the north to

the south, where labor is cheaper. Furthermore, less expensive labor will be imported from Egypt.

Incensed, the graffiti worker's union will call a strike to halt production. Furthermore, they will form picket lines and bash non-members over the head if they try to do any graffiti work. A long and bitter strike will ensue until labor finally agrees to standardize production in southern rural areas. Charter tours will be arranged so that tourists can visit these locales to capture a glimpse of our cultural heritage.

One side effect is created by the graffiti solution: many graffiti bosses and their staff members will still be paid by the government to do nothing. But this is a small price to pay for the vast amount of work that is not being done!