

A Strong Argument for Healthy Processes

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“Why is it that everything seems to take longer than I expected?”

If you have ever expressed that sentiment, you likely weren't seeking an answer. You were merely venting a frustration we've all probably experienced!

There is, however, an answer to that question. Pursue it with me, and you can live with less distress.

“All Things are Created Twice” is a subtitle in the “Habit 2” chapter of Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. “There's a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation to all things.” The “to do” item you write on your list is the product of your mental creation. Imagining your execution, the desired outcome manifests with little effort and with no snags, obstacles, or delays.

The anticipated result of your mental creation occurs quickly. The physical creation, however, runs into all kinds of unanticipated resistance and diversions.

You're probably familiar with the adage known as Murphy's Law, “Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.” In executing your “to do” item, you typically run into many unexpected problems:

- You can't find the file you need.
- The phone interrupts your search, and it's a customer with a complaint.
- The copier jams, you run out of staples, or you spill coffee on your originals.
- You look for information on the internet, and you find something unexpected. You follow that interesting distraction and twenty minutes flies by!

The discrepancy between the expected time generated in the mental creation and the actual time required for the physical creation is often significant!

There are many reasons for developing repeatable processes. One is quality improvement, the reason the ISO-9000 set of criteria was established. (Many manufacturers require their suppliers to be ISO-9001 certified. If you're not familiar with this accreditation, look it up.)

Another very beneficial reason for having well defined and articulated processes is to make your use of time more effective. We humans tend to systematize our repetitive behaviors. For example, pay attention next time you put on your shoes. I can almost guarantee you consistently put one of them on first. The same with putting on a jacket--you likely put your right arm (or left arm) in first every time.

I'm not advocating that you document your method for putting on a jacket. However, if you travel occasionally, you know how valuable it is to have a checklist of items. Otherwise, you'll tend to forget a belt, a tie, or your prescription medication.

In 2009, surgeon Atul Gawande published *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*. Hospitals around the world have adopted a simple surgical checklist based on this book, saving lives and shortening hospital stays for many individuals.

If a step-by-step procedure is good enough for a surgeon, an airline pilot, and dozens of other professionals--for activities that they do daily--maybe it could be helpful for you for activities you execute less frequently. Consider those invoices you do every month. Consider that reminder note you send out periodically to existing clients, inviting them to send referrals your way.

I receive requests from leaders who are looking for timesaving tips. Here's one: document your processes. I guarantee that you'll find improvements that will reduce the required time, and if you'll execute the process the same way every time, you'll reduce mistakes and distractions. Give it a try!