

Recognizing and Using “Content” and “Process”

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Leaders find it beneficial to understand the distinction between content and process. Being aware of this difference allows you to focus when you need to, yet also step back from the overall systems to evaluate what's working, what needs improvement, and where further enhancements are possible.

Questions Associated with “Content” and “Process.” Most of us learned in an English class about the six questions that a reporter needs to answer in a thorough news story. They are: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

In any given activity, content is the “what” being addressed. In a meeting, for example, content is the current agenda item, the topic important enough to command everyone's attention at the moment.

The remaining five questions address process:

- Why are we having this meeting?
- Who will be invited to attend the meeting?
- Where will the meeting be conducted? Where should people sit?
- When is the meeting? When (in what order) will each agenda item occur?
- How will each agenda item be introduced and handled? How long will each agenda item last?

In organizing the meeting, the leader thinks about both the content (the individual agenda items) and the process (all the other remaining considerations).

To Engage in Content or Facilitate the Process? I encourage leaders to clearly choose in advance between participating in the content and facilitating the process.

Attempting to both participate in the dialogue and manage the flow of the meeting creates confusion for the other participants. Such a leader is subject to allegations of manipulation: “He just stopped the conversation to prevent those with opposing viewpoints from expressing their opinions!”

Sometimes the leader may intend to manage the process, but be pulled into the content by another meeting participant. If the leader expects this may occur, or if the leader wants to participate in the dialogue, arrangements should be made for a different person to serve as process facilitator.

Working “In” or “On” Your Systems. Repeated processes are usually called “systems.” We all have systems in our personal and professional lives. We would struggle to function without systems. They provide the structure by which we make progress and keep things in order.

As long as you are satisfied with the outcomes you are achieving, you typically execute your systems habitually, almost without even thinking about them.

Ah, but what if you aren't satisfied? What if you want something better? Then you start analyzing not only the content of what you are doing, but also the methodology by which you do it.

Working “in” your systems (focusing on content) is appropriate much of the time. However, little improvement will occur by working “in” your systems. Working “on” your systems will more effectively yield the improvement you seek.

Sometimes I call this a difference between “heads down” work and “heads up” work. When you are intensely focused on a particular project or issue, your head is “down.” You are not aware of what others are doing around you. You are oblivious to improvements being made in technology, new laws being passed, or changes being made in the infrastructure.

Leaders should be doing a lot of “heads up” work. You project your operations years into the future, considering alternative directions and developing a strategy to take your organization toward a

desired outcome. As your authority and responsibility grow, you should spend more time focused on process, looking for competent individuals to focus on the content you used to handle.

Your perspective is likely different from others in your organization. Their thoughts are focused on the specific situations they face, while you are probably considering the overall process of providing appropriate services to your customers. Your task may be to expand their focus from the specific content of the current circumstances onto the longer-range process.

Summary. Early in your career, you focused on “content,” the specific activities that you did on each particular day. Most of your time was spent executing some particular aspect of the work.

As you’ve matured in your career, you spend more of your time considering the overall “process.” You also focus on process as you plan and lead meetings. You seek balance, ensuring that all the important focus areas will be addressed. As a recognized leader in your organization, you have moved from primarily executing the work to facilitating the work of other individuals.

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