By Chad Foster

Systems are valuable tools. They allow units to accomplish routine tasks in a routine manner. They also help ensure a measure of efficiency in organizational functions. The larger the organization, the more important it is to have well-established and sensible systems in place. However, systems are also flawed and limited. Too often, a leader proclaims himself to be a "systems guy" and then promptly forgets the potential impacts of those limitations if left unchecked. Like a weed, bureaucracy takes root and spreads quickly, undermining true organizational effectiveness and choking out the morale of team members. The solution is leadership. In order to avoid becoming bureaucrats, leaders must invest more in their people than they do in the processes and procedures of their beloved systems.

Bureaucrats are not leaders. At best, they are managers. At worst, they are robots who make few decisions. While all leaders, especially those in charge of large units or

organizations, have one foot in the arena of management, the best of them labor strenuously to avoid crossing the line and becoming bureaucrats. Leadership is a human business. Teams composed of individual human beings cannot be led by treating them like machines built from interchangeable parts. Bureaucrats look inward, concerning themselves almost exclusively with whether or not all the boxes are checked. In their minds, duty equates to procedural adherence. Doing so is safe because any mistakes that might result can be blamed on the system. Risk and individual responsibility are things to be avoided. In contrast, leaders look both inward and outward with an understanding of their team and why it exists. To leaders, duty is doing the right thing. Risk and accountability are inherent to the job. Sometimes that requires that the system be adjusted, bypassed, or even scrapped completely.

Standardization is inherent in systems. It is comfortable. It carries with it the perception of fairness because things are, in theory, the same for everyone, every time. Standardization is also attractive because its predictability facilitates the efficient expenditure of time and resources. However, it can also enable laziness and, in the worst cases, professional cowardice. If all one has to do is follow procedure, there is no need to think. Problems arise when the procedure fails to produce the outcome for which it was designed. All the right boxes might be checked, but none of that ensures that the right thing happens. Although he or she might claim otherwise, a bureaucrat is satisfied with such a situation because the system itself has become the overriding concern. Preserving the system – and the bureaucrat's place in it – is the driving imperative.

It takes a thinking and empowered leader with strength of character to cut through the red tape of bureaucracy. It is for this reason that we look to place this type of leader at key points within our systems. These individuals constitute a sanity check to ensure that the rules, processes, and procedures actually achieve the right outcomes. Exceptions to rules and policies are often necessary to do so. These exceptions cannot be arbitrary, however. It takes sound judgement to determine when to grant them, and it takes transparency to avoid perceptions of favoritism. Leaders must expend a great deal of effort to get everyone on the same page in understanding not just the "how" of the system, but also the "why" behind it. Only when one understands the underlying purpose can he or she make or recommend effective deviations from standard procedure.

Of course, it is far easier to just stick with the procedure than it is to make difficult decisions. The system can provide cover for those who are unwilling or unable to make those calls. An unchecked bureaucracy is frequently the last, best refuge for the incompetent and the cowardly. A common admonishment that one hears is this: *"We have a process for that*!" There is no issue with having established processes, but it becomes

problematic when we allow ourselves and our teams to become prisoners of those processes and cast aside thinking in favor of a mindless adherence to a rigid procedure or set of rules. This dogmatic approach is the point where an organization crosses the line and the balance shifts in favor of bureaucracy. Bureaucracies accentuate those attributes that are exactly the opposite of what is needed to operate in chaotic and complex environments: centralization, top-down decision making, strict adherence to procedure, and conformity. None of these are what we, as an military, claim to value in our leaders.

To get the outcomes that our military wants and needs, we must make a substantial investment in our people. That investment consists of clearly communicated intent and empowering the individual leaders within our organizational systems to meet that intent. It is a simple idea but not one easily put into practice. How can we make this investment? Below are some thoughts on how to do so.

1) Standardize only what is absolutely necessary. Think of it this way: each thing that you standardize across the entire unit or organization takes some measure of discretion and decision-making ability out of the hands of subordinate leaders. Some standardization is necessary and sensible. However, most things do not need to be dictated from higher headquarters. Be skeptical about giving directives to standardize. If you feel the need give such a directive, ensure that you fully understand the reasons for standardization – and, just as importantly, make certain that your subordinates understand those reasons. For everything else, clearly communicate an intent and leave the details of execution to subordinate leaders.

2) Clearly communicate intended outcomes for whatever systems you have in place. Building on the point above, it is imperative that you explain the "why" behind things. Understanding the "why" allows subordinates to make adjustments and exercise initiative at the lowest level. They will not have to constantly bring decisions to your door for approval. A big part of the "why" consists of providing some left and right limits to guide initiative – it is the same as providing intent in a tactical operation and should be treated as such. When subordinates make honest mistakes (and they will), treat them as valuable learning opportunities and quickly turn those subordinates loose again. This is how you build trust and confidence within the team.

3) Make a leader – not a bureaucrat – responsible for oversight of systems. Know your people. Find the leaders. Provide these leaders with both the responsibility and authority to make decisions. Put them in charge. Let them lead. Back their calls. Underwrite their mistakes. You will know the leaders when you see them: they are comfortable with making decisions, understand when they need to ask for additional guidance, enjoy taking

responsibility, prioritize doing the right thing ahead of their own personal advancement, and are able to connect the dots between purpose and outcome. Just as importantly, keep the bureaucrats out of positions where they can impede initiative or issue vetoes. You will also know the bureaucrats when you see them: they are comfortable with rigid procedures, have a preference for strict rules, and are reluctant to grant flexibility. Very often, the top priority of the bureaucrat is the preservation of their position or personal advancement. Try to develop them out of being bureaucrats, but if you fail to do so, make sure that you do not help them get promoted. The last thing that we need among our senior officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) is bureaucrats.

Investing in your people is a long term endeavor. You will not always see the results right away. It may be years before you do, but the return is always worth the time and energy expended. Being a "systems guy" does not preclude this investment. A system is only as good as the people that are involved in it. Leaders must create the conditions for those people and the associated systems to thrive. Deviating from procedure is quite often the right thing to do. Have the good sense to recognize when this is the case. Teach and empower your subordinates to do the same. Resist the safety and comfort of bureaucracy at all costs, even when following that course offers better prospects for personal advancement. Leaders do more than just manage processes. They make tough decisions in tough situations. That is what they get paid to do. Have the courage to make those decisions, and ensure that your subordinates are empowered and equipped to make them, too. This is your investment in the future of the military!

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