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AGILEAN shows organizations how to use lean office techniques to produce greater customer value in less time with fewer errors

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Putting Character into Employee Roles

What's your role within your organization? Perhaps like many people, your role is defined by a job description that lists a number of tasks. Does this fully define the role you perform for the organization? Chances are not. Job descriptions sketch out the basics but they can't build character into a role.

A role is defined as – the proper sphere or extent of your tasks. The key delineating word for most organizations is “tasks.” However, defining a role by its tasks leaves some unanswered questions:

- Is the role completely defined?
- Do the tasks specify what's not in the role?
- How are conflicting priorities resolved?
- Do the tasks overlap with other roles
- When do the tasks no longer apply?

Business and the B Movie

Using task lists to define a role is like defining a single role out of a movie by looking only at its speaking lines. Imagine giving an actress her lines – and not anyone else's – and then asking her to interpret her role's character. It's impossible. Yet this is exactly what most organizations expect from their employees.

We've all seen the B movies where the acting is stilted because the roles are performed without any character. In business, some people play their roles as if they were in a B movie. They execute their tasks with no more flair than an actor just reading his lines – resulting in the same uninspired performance.

The lack of characterization of a role may not be the employee's fault; any more than it is the actor's. Whether in a play or business, role characterization is developed by understanding how that role interacts with other roles and its environment. Without character, there is no room for interpretation and employees are left few options other than the rote execution of tasks.

A Sphere of Influence

Let's look at the definition of a role once again – the proper sphere of your tasks. What if we deemphasize the word “tasks” and highlight the word “sphere?” Instead of defining a role by its tasks, we define the role by its sphere of influence; how it interacts with its environment. Under this scenario the content of the role is treated like a black box, it doesn't matter what's in it. Using this approach the role's sphere of influence is defined by:

- Required inputs, expected outputs, supporting assets
- Work priorities
- Throughput – the volume of work
- Cycle time – the time to perform its work
- Quality

The above attributes define the character of a role. Exactly how the role is performed is left up to the employees; as long as they don't infringe on the role's character. This strategy works well in flat or matrix organizations and where there is a lot of variation in the day-to-day work expected of employees.

Defining roles by their sphere of influence frees management to set clear expectations on how each role is performed – rather than being obliged to micromanage tasks. Employees are free to continuously improve the performance of their role – rather than executing their tasks like drones in a B movie. Everyone is able to focus on the value being produced by the customer and strive to eliminate non-value producing activities. Role playing with lots of character spices up any performance.

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