

Span of Control for Facilities Management

By Matt Adams, P.E.

In the APPA Leadership Academy there is a great deal of discussion about an individual's capacity to lead. This discussion goes beyond a simple assessment of leadership skills or effectiveness, and includes the concept that there is only so much of an individual's time available during the day, week, month, and year to provide leadership, and that this time is being spread further every year.

No one in good standing is being called into the boss's office and being told that they will now have less responsibility and fewer direct reports. Like every other aspect of the facilities management (FM) profession, we are called upon to do more with less,

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even with regard to leadership. One of the basic metrics of leadership is span of control. Span of control (SOC) has been discussed in management courses for decades. While it is not clear where the original heuristics originated, it was common during the 1950s and '60s to think that a ratio of 6 to 1 was the standard. However, since then much has changed. The skills of managers have improved, and technology has enabled more efficient communication and use of data. Also important is the fact that the nature of the work performed has changed in most industries including FM.

THE DELAYERING PRACTICE

The famous businessman, management guru, and speaker Jack Welch is quoted as saying he preferred an SOC within General Electric of 10 to 1. That is to say that every manager had 10 direct reports.

He also said that any organization with more than five layers had built-in management inefficiency. This belief has become widely accepted within most industries and has resulted in a practice called “delayering.” Delayering is another way of saying that during a reorganization, the SOC is increased and the number of layers of management is reduced. Delayering and increasing SOC go together by necessity. Delayering directly impacts the leadership of your department or organization in a number of ways:

- The actual cost of management salaries is reduced.
- Managers are typically moved closer to their customers and become more in tune with them.
- Most managers learn to trust and empower their direct reports; otherwise they must spread themselves further (the opposite of consensus on best practice in the APPA Leadership Academy).
- The new generation of managers in the FM industry exploit technology, leadership best practices, easier access to training, and all theories of employee empowerment to leverage their limited time as leaders in flatter organizations.

Given that many of us will be called upon to delay at some point in the future, it is important to learn and utilize the factors that influence SOC in order to make smart decisions. Considering the myriad of service departments within an FM organization, coupled with the uniqueness of each institution, the factors of SOC can be applied to each part of the organization on its respective merits.

THE WORK AND THE WORKERS

There are two factors or axes that apply to management SOC requirements, based on the work and the workers. The first is the variability of the work. Within facilities there are tasks that are repeatable

and standardized. On the other hand, there are tasks that are highly variable and complex. These represent the spectrum of technical complexity of the work itself, not the worker. Simple, repeatable tasks require less managerial supervision. Conversely, complex, variable tasks require more management.

The second factor affecting SOC requirements involves the worker. Contrast the work factor with the worker: The ability of a worker to understand the performance requirements of a given job and execute it varies inversely with the level of management oversight required. This is to say that responsible workers who understand the “job-to-be-done” require the least amount of supervision. Naturally, the opposite is true as well. The application of this factor would suggest that skilled, responsible workers allow their managers to have a greater SOC.

THE MANAGER'S STYLE

This factor offers the most potential for organizations within our industry. The more dictatorial (micromanager) style of the past often exhausted managers and required a small ratio of SOC. This is anathema to everything taught by APPA in its leadership classes today. Modern leadership styles that include trust, empowerment, respect, and recognition (to name a few characteristics) allow for flatter organizations and greater SOC.

In addition, forward-thinking leaders utilize technology to expand communication and exploit data-driven decision-making capacity. Workers should be given more ability to plan their own work and make decisions related to scheduling its completion. They are best measured based on their output or results and not on the actions required to perform their jobs.

This form of management requires more confidence and trust than older styles. It is sometimes perceived as risky, but only by those who do not see the underutilized ability of the vast majority of workers to succeed with more control over their own workspace and delivery. Managers and cultures that learn to embrace these new themes can expand SOC considerably and flatten their organizations.

THE NATURE OF THE INSTITUTION

Extending beyond the leadership style of managers and even more powerful is the culture of the institution. With the exception of technical on-the-job training, a winning culture provides much of the leadership influence required by most skilled and

motivated workers. The culture can be described by the values it is based upon. There are many values that apply, such as trust, professional growth, transparency, accountability, and respect. Leaders who understand culture, and who introduce a culture based on carefully selected values, greatly enhance their organization's ability to operate with very little direct management in the traditional sense. It is one thing to teach a worker the technical aspects of a job, and quite another to nurture a culture or environment where that same person desires to perform at the highest level with little or no interference from the boss.

There are plenty of examples of this in our industry. There are custodial operations that do not require staff to punch a time clock but to simply arrive at their workplace(s), perform their duties, and enjoy the maximum amount of time on the job without interference from management bureaucracy. There are zone-maintenance organizations where everyone is a working technician and works independently or in teams based on their own internal planning. These self-starters are encouraged by a culture of empowerment, and very little zone supervision is required.

Ultimately the largest impediment to increasing SOC and delayering within our industry is fear. Many of us believe that if we take a chance and give our staff considerably more control over their own work, something terrible will happen and everyone will lose their jobs. This is irrational. The truth is that bad things may indeed happen to those who won't learn to use modern management practices to increase SOC and delayer their organizations. 💰

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Matt Adams is president of Adams FM², Atlanta, GA. He can be reached at matt@adamsfm2.com.

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