



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 51, No. 10

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, OCTOBER 1970

From Paper Plans to Action

LIKE A SHEET OF MUSIC, paper plans are ineffectual unless performed. The conductors who bring business plans into action and conduct their performance are the middle-management people, supervisors, foremen and department overseers.

The committee stage has been passed; the shuffling of papers has ended; the big picture has been drawn: now we get down to the bolts and nuts of production.

The man charged with bridging the gap between the laboratory or the draughting room and the shipping door still has planning to do, but of a different sort. He has a written description of what the finished product is to be; the outlay of money and time and energy has been computed; now he must take the podium and direct his department's performance with skill and sensitivity so as to interpret the planners' score successfully and with some felicity.

The three persistent problems of middle-management are: the efficient application of technical skill; the systematic ordering of operations; and the organization of sustained co-operation, called teamwork. If these are out of balance no other virtues will compensate and the operation as a whole will not be successful.

This is the place where middle-management ability shows itself. One of the chief skills is understanding the plan to the point of accepting it as being workable. Some men may greet a plan with the hoary statement: "it is all very well in theory but it won't do in practice". That is false reasoning which gets one nowhere. If a thing will not work in practice then there is a mistake in the theory. Something has been overlooked and not allowed for. The plan had better go back for revision.

There is need to interpret the plans in accord with their purpose. Sometimes this requires modification of them, but with care. We do not know precisely how he carried out his orders, but obviously Noah did not do his job exactly in accordance with the plan given him. If the story of the Great Flood be taken literally, it is pointed out by Mark Twain in *Letters from the Earth*, he would have had to collect 146,000 kinds of

birds and beasts and freshwater creatures, and more than two million species of insect in his 550-foot long ark. Obviously, as a middle-management man he used his head in achieving the purpose of preserving animal life upon the earth.

Adopting and adapting

Methods which cannot be adopted and used "as is" can be adapted with surprising ease by adding a personal twist. But if a vital change has to be made in the plan for a major operation, then the whole plan must be re-examined from start to finish.

Field Marshal Montgomery stated this principle like this: The master plan must never be so rigid that the Commander-in-Chief cannot vary it to suit the changing tactical situation; but nobody else may be allowed to change it at will.

The start of activity on a plan is not the time to be timid, but to face up to difficulties and get all the help needed. This does not indicate distrust of one's self, but common sense. Churchill sent a memo to the Home Secretary about expediting a bit of business. He added: "inviting me to assist you in suppressing obstruction."

Plans are subject to change in detail, sometimes because a customer has changed his mind about the pattern or size; sometimes because of executive second thoughts; and sometimes because of difficulties met in execution. Part of nearly every plan has to be re-edited in the light of events as action proceeds.

You may have been over the same drill a dozen times, but it does no harm to review it once in a while. If you learn that you have made progress and are headed in the right direction that is heartening. If, on the other hand, your review reveals that you have deviated from the straight path, or that your time schedule is lagging, such a discovery saves you from the mortification of ending up at the wrong place or at the wrong time.

About getting going

You cannot begin a task effectively by coasting.

Start with energy. Initial inertia is a law of all life. It takes more effort to get going than to keep going.

Fortune does not smile on those who, having prepared to do a job, hesitate. Dr. Donald A. Laird wrote in his book *The Technique of Getting Things Done* (McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1947): "Don't look at a thing: start it. Don't put it off a day: start it. Don't pretend you must think it over: start it. Don't start halfheartedly: put everything you can muster into your start."

When taking up a task that is mainly a series of acts all of which you have previously handled well, you ought to strike your pace in a few seconds or minutes. If you spend five minutes in warming up to a job easily performed and thoroughly mastered, the chances are that there is something wrong with you, the job, or the environment.

Closely akin to procrastinating, or putting off, is dithering. Some people habitually putter around instead of getting down to work. They should copy and paste on the wall a saying of King Claudius in *Hamlet*: "that we would do we should do when we would."

There is no enjoyment in putting things off. We get no pleasure out of postponing our chores. The undone things nag at us. We risk losing our self-respect. Moreover, when an accumulation of things to be done descends inescapably upon us we encounter unending ills.

Theodore Roosevelt is remembered because he preached the strenuous life. But his own energetic handling of his many duties was not a matter of temperament and muscle only: he had a systematic organization of his working day.

There are two hints that may be useful in overcoming the common fault of procrastination. The first is: commit yourself. Having promised performance by a set date, you find yourself in honour bound to fulfil it. The second is: do not tackle an accumulation of work like a bulldozer. Break the pile down into small, accessible units, and grapple with them one by one. It has been said that the best way to peel a sack of potatoes is to start on the first one.

Having defined your goals you may or you may not need to write plans for your part of the job. Taking pains at this stage, checking even small details in the blue-print, helps toward efficient work. At least make a note of the things to be accomplished and indicate priorities.

Every part of every job lends itself to listing in two columns on a sheet of paper: steps in the job, and, opposite each step, the key points about which to be careful.

It is not necessary to write minute instructions for every job. Avoid needless work in the transition from plans to accomplishment. But if there is some part of the job that is specially intricate or carries particular danger of error, make a detailed description of that piece of work.

Making a schedule

When a plan reaches the action stage there is likely to be a convulsive scene. It is necessary to assign proportions and priorities as far as possible. Unless progress is planned reasonably well, confusion is likely to occur.

The major schedule will be set in the master planning: completion by such-and-such a date. There remains the subsidiary scheduling so that all parts fit into the ultimate result. This divides the job into individual operations which some foremen call "subjobs."

When you provide yourself with a complete picture of the work to be done you will not feel under compulsion to press all subjobs with equal vigour. You can pick the parts that need to be hurried along. Some will run in parallel: others must follow one another.

Distribute the functions involved in the jobs according to time. Dating back from the target completion date, what must be done today, tomorrow? Sequence is vital. If the nature of the job does not dictate in what order operations are to be done, perform the most essential things first.

Write down the five or six essential segments of the job. Then number them in order of their importance. This will take about five minutes of your time. Now tackle the subjobs one by one.

What is the advantage? You are always sure that you are working on the most important things; your mind is not cluttered up with worry about whether you are doing the right thing.

If the job has several sub-divisions, keep a memo on every one. Memory is not a substitute for a memorandum.

Sometimes a chart is the proper sort of schedule. A chart shows everyone where the action is and what progress has been made.

Some managers and foremen use what they call the Critical Path method. This shows by arrows how the project activities relate to one another, the time they must start, and the completion dead-line for each. This reduces idle manpower to a minimum and reveals in advance where there are possible trouble spots.

Elaborate control boards are used in some offices and factories to keep track of progress. Every individual can have his own very simple control system. All he may need are three spikes marked: "to be done, doing, done." He will move assignment sheets or memos from one to another so that he is not carrying in his head all that he has on his hands.

Staying on the beam

Airplane navigators used to have a system they called "deduced reckoning". This, which is still at the base of navigational science used on steamers, submarines and air liners, is described in a technical dictionary as "calculation of the position of the ship

from the speed and time from its last known position." It means laying out your work and then keeping track of how fast you are going, in what direction, and of when you slow down, speed up, or change course.

Such a system contributes to orderliness. When you work in an efficient way, you solve more problems, make fewer experiments, incur fewer incorrect reactions, use less time and expend less energy.

Everyone, whether in factory or executive office, will study the efficiency of his environment and tools. Do they save time and steps and prevent fumbling? O. J. Greenway, Management Consultant of Honeywell Inc., St. Petersburg, handling the production of inertial guidance systems for missiles and rockets, described the benefits neatly: "The quality of orderliness and cleanliness is an indication of the efficiency and effectiveness of operations." And 2,500 years earlier Confucius declared: "Order is Heaven's only law."

The workshop arrangements are important in doing the job. A well-arranged office, desk, work-bench or tool board contributes to efficiency. The best magic for the supervisor is to put useful tools where they can be easily and quickly found. Streamline your work with as few hindrances to its flow as possible. Photographs and bric-a-brac on a desk may add to its picturesque, but they are obstacles and distractions.

To do a job competently, seek simplicity of layout. The day of the massive roll-top desk has gone, but many an office is crowded with needless files full of records, books in inconvenient corners, and trays of letters, trade papers and documents either awaiting action or put there for storage. Some people, even those with important managerial jobs, seem to think that an office strewn with magazines and papers waiting to be read adds to the impression of busyness and importance they wish to give callers.

As a supervisor

You stand at the point where planning and theory terminate in the cutting-edge of direct action. The executives have prepared a statement of what they want done, or the customers have ordered the goods they desire: these are the objectives. Now the thing to do is to outline the steps to be taken and to take the first step. Set up milestones to tell you how far you have progressed and how far you still have to go. Be alert to foresee bottle-necks and be ready to move around them.

From here on, you must interpret and direct. Business is not run on the old town meeting basis, with everyone having a say about what is to be done and how the project is to be carried out. As the First Murderer said to the Duke of Gloucester in *The Tragedy of King Richard III*: "We will not stand to prate, talkers are no good doers: be assur'd we come to use our hands, and not our tongues."

Brief everyone who is concerned in the project as far as is necessary to assure integration of effort. This

is particularly necessary when several departments or sections are affected. As in a play, give the actors cues so that everyone knows when to come on stage and start doing his bit.

You will have assured yourself before this point is reached that you have all the factual information you need in order to do a professional job. It is not wise for the supervisor to have to go back for additional information after he has started the job. By that time the planners have other things on their minds.

You will have checked to see that the necessary equipment is available and in good condition and that the needed supplies are on hand or on the way. You cannot afford to sit back waiting for a dilatory supplier to act.

Share your work. You already know the strengths and weaknesses of your organization. Now you need to delegate to others, those who will do the work; and co-operate with people in other departments.

It is good practice to deliberate with caution but act with decision and promptness. It is wise also to develop the habit of precision, which helps toward getting things done correctly so that they do not have to be done over.

Organized and disciplined working habits will contribute mightily toward your success. Persistence, sometimes called picturesquely "sticktoitiveness", sees the job through to completion. The tendency to persist in spite of all hindrances, discouragements and "impossibilities" is the sterling mark of the best supervisors.

Are plans working out?

Hitherto you have considered operations on the paper plane where things behave as you wish them to behave. Now you will find out whether the laws of behaviour you ascribed to them in your schedule hold good in practice. Timing a job, for example, is not always as simple as paperwork makes it seem. Is the time being spent on subjobs in proportion to their importance? Are there unrelated duties stealing time from this project? Are daily routine or casual tasks distracting your mind?

Make it a matter of custom to analyze your actions, to pare them down to the bones. Consider paperwork: that bane of many a supervisor's life. It is a good rule to dispose of a piece of paper when you first pick it up. Put it in the same place as similar items; write a name or "file" on it and put it in the "out" tray; or write on it "date file" and a date, and leave it to your secretary or filing clerk to lay it on your desk on the designated day.

Getting things done in this way must not be confused with petty bustling movement. Some people become addicted to the opium of activity, and lose themselves in it. Others confuse accomplishment with busyness, and think that if they be ever moving they must needs advance and achieve. Activity is not

always the opposite of idleness. A man is idle when he is doing something less useful than he could be doing.

Having a pattern of orderliness helps you when difficulties arise. Life would be very dull if it presented no problems. But instead of waiting for them apprehensively try to prepare for them by advance thinking. Methodical anticipation is just as important as, and in many ways better than, the capability to handle crises.

When a job does not move toward completion as on greased skids, there is no advantage in panic and no benefit in melancholy mumblings. Dig through all the reasons for the slow-down until you pin down the one that counts.

When your work is interrupted or interfered with by outside influences, size up the situation and analyze it; act decisively to get back on the beam and get your job running smoothly again; learn by the incident and take steps to prevent a recurrence. Draw upon all available resources. Use your own talent to the full, but do not be so high and mighty that you think you can do everything yourself.

When you have had a job in process for a reasonable length of time, take a look at it to learn if there is an easier or more efficient way of doing it. This perceptive look is what creates the remarkable insight a manager displays, a new look at things that produces improvements in layout, work ways and techniques that seem like wizardry to the unenlightened.

The operational level

On the top planning level there is room for imagination, invention and the spirit of adventure: when the plan reaches the desk or the work-bench there is room for ingenuity and skill of the old-fashioned artisan sort. Get a fix on what is required, then go to work on the details that affect your part of the job.

Group the activities so that one follows the other with least disruption and effort. If you have a letter to write, dig up the necessary facts before dictating "Dear Sir". If you have a carpentry job to do, think it through from beginning to completion and collect what is needed on the site of the job. The best mechanic will be the one able to organize his jobs, know where to find necessary information, and know when to ask for guidance.

Perform the work in the most efficient and economical way possible. Set your speed to suit the job and the conditions under which you are working. An even pace, rather than a series of spurts, makes the best use of your energy so that you effect most with the least effort.

Whether on the middle-management level or at the desk or work-bench, develop professionalism. No matter what your job may be you can develop some form of art or achieve pride in craftsmanship. Resolve to put the stamp of your own spirit upon the work and to be above the mediocrity that satisfies a man who

is not a real pro. Even in the Stone Age there were masters of their craft who were proud of the hatchet heads they chipped from flints.

A professional enjoys what he is working at. He knows its value and meaning and he experiences that perennial nobleness in work that gets things done. The word "efficiency" comes from the Latin "efficio", meaning "I do thoroughly, completely, triumphantly." The highest efficiency is attained when a given amount of energy is so wisely directed that a task is completed in the least possible space and after the lapse of the least possible time.

All the precepts in the systems manuals are worthless unless a man has the spirit to make them work. This is a law of life as old as the first caveman's fire. Emerson put it into a line: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm."

Enthusiasm means having real interest, and everyone knows what having a real interest in an endeavour can accomplish. One's spirits rise when action starts, and there is an enlivening feeling of zest. Enthusiasm is interest plus energy, a wish to do something and the spirit to get on with it. It is doing things: not talking about them. As Theseus, King of Athens, said in one of Sophocles' plays: "Nor am I careful to adorn my life with words of praise, but with the light of deeds."

A great satisfaction

The satisfaction to be derived from completing a constructive enterprise is one of the most massive that life has to offer.

The tests are: (1) Does the piece of work please the person who did it? (2) Does it satisfy the person for whom it was done? (3) Does it accomplish the purpose for which it was designed? If it has these three merits it is good. If, in addition, it has virtue in itself, then it is excellent, thereby adding grace to the doer, the recipient, and the work.

Men and women who can do things in that spirit are in great demand. They have the quality of concentrating upon goals attainable in the given situation and solving immediate problems as they arise.

In every walk of scholarly or practical life, and at every level of work, those who get things done are preferred by society to those who do not. The prizes of life go to those who erect buildings, decipher ancient inscriptions, solve equations, build machines, improve farm production, discover a health-giving drug, or govern a province or the nation, rather than to those who convince themselves that these tasks cannot be done because of inevitable difficulties.

In the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful or the strongest or the most imaginative or the most talkative people who win the crowns, but those who actually enter the lists as combatants and do things. To get from paper plans to action one must commit oneself. It is unjust and unreasonable to be unwilling to pay this price.