

Write Down Your Processes for Goodness' Sake

"Last time I was here, I had no problem swapping mashed potatoes for the French fries. So why is it a problem today?" a customer retorts with frustration.

"When I bought the car, I was told your service policy was to wash my car every time it comes in for service, but half the time, you tell me my car is ready, but I'll have to wait longer if I want it washed."

Sound familiar? Ever had the rules changed on you?

Are you familiar with the [Telephone game](#) in which one person whispers a message into the ear of the next person? The way this game goes is that a group of individuals form a circle and one person starts with the original news. The information is transferred from one person to the next until it goes all the way around the circle. As the message comes back around, the last person communicates out loud to the whole group—and laughter breaks out as everyone comments on what they thought they heard.

This is a favorite party game around the world because it illustrates how much each person distorts the message to the extent that the final message is often completely unrelated to the original. The larger the group, the more erroneous the message becomes. It's downright funny how unreliable verbal communication can be. In a game the result is laughter, but in business, the result is leakage!

Now imagine relying on verbal communication in a company with dozens of employees? How about hundreds of employees, or even thousands. People are talking—you can count on it! It's management's responsibility to ensure they're all sending the same message. If top managers want to allow substitutions, do

all of your employees permit customers to swap mashed potatoes for French fries? If it's your policy to wash *all* cars after servicing them, are you counting how many actually get washed? If these things aren't happening consistently, what impression do you think you're giving your customers?

So what does this mean to business owners and managers? It can be very expensive to count on verbal communication as the primary means of running your business. Verbal communication differs tremendously from person to person. Variability is the opposite of stability or standardization.

If every employee does things his or her own way, the customer ends up having a different experience each time he does business with you. Not only does your business success depend on putting standard practices into place, it also depends on being sure that they're getting carried out every day.

Variability means less predictability and more chaos for your employees and customers. If service or problem resolution is handled a different way each time it happens, customers become frustrated and typically even inform employees *how things were done around here the last time*. Erratic processes increase employee stress and lower customer satisfaction.

IBM Manager Bob Haataia suggests a good idea. Imagine the same circle game but with a new rule—the first person has to write the message on a piece of paper and read it quietly to their neighbor, then pass it on to the next person and so on, until it goes all the way around the circle. This game wouldn't be anywhere near as comical as the first because if everyone followed the rules, the first message would be exactly the same as the last. You can count on it. You can predict it. No game!

If you had 10, 100, or even 1000 people standing in a circle, they could discuss other matters amongst themselves until the written message got around to the last person because they

would already know how the game will end. It will end with everyone getting the same message. There's no confusion and no stress. If a company has well-written procedures and work instructions and employees are properly trained in carrying out these good practices, then the organization has a much better chance at promoting their brand by giving their customers a consistent experience.

God delivered us a message through his son, but he made sure that there were people around to write down the stories. He didn't leave it to chance. If God thinks it's a good idea, I choose to agree.

Some people may interpret the written words a bit differently, and if they do, you have the opportunity to discuss the instructions or procedures to make it more clear to everyone.

Do you have a company mission statement? Are your core business processes written down? Do they support your mission? Is everyone marching in the same direction without tripping over one another?

If you said 'no' to any of these questions and would like help in standardizing best practices in your company, contact [Dr. Lorraine](#) for a consultation. Together, we can put together plan for you to standardize and continuously improve your processes and your profitability.