The Edge: Can doing a great job hurt your business?

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(Photo: For FLORIDA TODAY)

You don’t start your day saying, “Today I’ll create problems, frustrate clients and disappoint my boss.” You work hard to achieve your job’s objectives and support the goals of your department. And if all your co-workers do the same, your company must be performing at 100 percent — right?

Not necessarily. When departmental goals are not aligned to achieve the company’s overall objectives, individuals and departments can be successful while the business suffers. Here are a few of the many problems that can occur when this happens.

• Stealth systems: Martha’s software application allows her to enter actual sales, but not forecasts, so Martha takes the initiative and creates a spreadsheet to track the information. Martha’s counterpart in another division has the same problem, and so she creates her own spreadsheet, which is completely different than Martha’s. Management asks, “Why isn’t forecast reliability consistent across divisions?” The answer: stealth systems eliminate consistency in how
the data is gathered and analyzed. And when management asks for reports that consolidate data across divisions, someone is going to spend hours tracking down all the stealth systems and copying/pasting information from them.

• Redundant entry of information: Bob enters a sales order into a prospects application to generate a quote. Jane re-keys the same information into a sales system to create a sales record for invoicing. Fred types the same data when the product ships. Not only is this a waste of valuable employee time, it introduces the risk that data will be typed incorrectly, and if that doesn’t sound like a big deal, think about the difference a zero makes between a $1,000 and a $10,000 invoice.

• Unnecessary work is performed: Every week Wilma spends 10 hours consolidating data from multiple sources into a market analysis report that she emails to George, who relies heavily on the information. George suggests that Wilma copy a few other managers on the email, but they never read the report.

When George retires, Wilma emails the report to Susan, George’s replacement. Susan doesn’t like the format and feels there’s critical content missing, and so she creates another method of getting similar information in a format she prefers. Because there are other people on the distribution list for Wilma’s report, Susan assumes they are using it, and so she doesn’t bother to tell anybody that she’s not using it.

Issues like these often stay hidden until someone steps back and analyzes the way the overall business works. A great way to do this is to invest in a process improvement project. During the project, facilitators interview individuals involved in the process, document the workflow, and conduct a team meeting to review their findings. As the team develops a shared understanding of the process, they identify solutions, some of which can be implemented immediately — such as Wilma no longer investing 10 hours per week creating a report no one uses!

If you suspect that your company processes might include redundant or unnecessary work and a few stealth systems, consider conducting a process improvement project to find and fix problems before they hurt your business.