

“What’s the first thing we do to help clients find money?” That was the question Wendi and I set out to answer when we had a forehead-thumping déjà vu. Although we didn’t phrase it quite that way, we did answer that question here about two years ago. The answer still seems pretty timely, so we’re running it again, minus a couple of typos:

Accomplishing More with Less, *Instead of Doing More with Less*

We know more than a few people who are bitter about being asked to “do more with less.” We understand. If you are asked to keep doing the same stuff, but with less money and manpower, it feels like your only options are to work faster or longer, which after a point is ridiculous. One reader of *Government Executive* magazine reacted to President Obama’s April 2011 [call for leaner government](#) by commenting, “[Doing] ‘more with less’ just makes those who are left to do the work overburdened, underappreciated, and ready to call it quits!” That sentiment isn’t confined to the public sector.

Another sentiment we’ve seen in spades expresses the intention to do *less* with less: “You cut my budget by twenty percent? Fine. I’ll cut my output by twenty percent. What d’ya expect?! You poke me in the eye, I’ll poke you back.” Unfortunately, doing less with less isn’t effective in the today’s world. Whether we work in iPhones or airlines, *we all have to up our game to stay in the game.*

Most people who try to up their game do so by aiming for greater efficiency. It seems like the obvious place to start. But, granting that most organizations are ripe for streamlining, we’d suggest that anyone facing a belt-tightening first consider answering these three pointed questions:



Question #1: “What’s the point?” An admiral we know once remarked, “Before doing anything else, leaders have to ask the existential question: ‘Why does my organization exist?’” He’s right. What is the purpose or objective of your team, your organization, your project, or your process?

Another leader recently commented, “My people think the point of their job is to do safety inspections. It isn’t. The point of their job is to help ensure safety.” If he can help his employees to understand that, the work they do will become richer, more interesting, and more meaningful. Once people really know what business they’re in, some of their busy-ness can drop away.



Asking “what’s the point?” takes us a conceptual level higher than the old “effectiveness-before-efficiency” dictum. A thoughtful answer to that question provides extraordinary leverage for anyone who wants to achieve impact. If military strategist Clausewitz was right when he said that the *essence of strategy is to concentrate one’s forces on the “decisive point,”* then one sort of decisive point worth knowing is the point of one’s organization.

Question #2: “How will I know when I’ve achieved ‘the point’?” Pondering this question is the first step toward stating your point so clearly that you and everybody else involved will know exactly what a home run looks like. If you can do that, you will achieve what social scientists “[high inter-rater reliability](#).” In other words, you and your team will be able to agree whether something is happening rather than just hope you will know it when you see it.

For example, if a helpdesk department were to define their point as *maximizing the productivity of their users*, then they would be aimed in a good direction. At least they would know that their job is ultimately about users rather than technology. However, without a more specific goal, quite a lot of time and money could be ill spent in the service of “maximizing productivity.” A more specific statement might be, “Users will experience at least 99% uptime for their computers and smartphones” or “None of our users will report that their work was delayed due to technological breakdowns or outages.” Such clarifications are important because these two specific goals might drive different behavior – and spending decisions – even though they are both based on “maximizing productivity.”

Question #3: “What should we stop doing because it doesn’t achieve the point?” The people who whine loudest about being asked to do more with less paradoxically seem to be the ones who have the hardest time letting go of work. By “letting go,” we do not mean cutting back on existing effort; we mean completely stopping entire categories of activity that are not necessary or useful for reaching the primary goal. *If activities don’t help achieve “the point,” then they are pointless.*

The Prize: Answering these three pointed questions nets this reward: It frees people to focus on what they need to *accomplish*. It makes their *doing* more meaningful because it concentrates their attention on what actually matters. And with that kind of focus, it’s amazing how creative, resourceful, and energized people can be. Yes, people can even accomplish more with less, if only they understand the point of their efforts.

When we held a “[Results Roundtable](#)” for one senior leader and his team, he cautioned us in advance that it would be a short discussion because everybody already knew what they were there to do. To his surprise, it was not a short discussion, and it was not at all clear that his team understood as well as he did what they were supposed to accomplish. Afterward, he said it was the best such session he could recall. When we asked why, he said, “Because now we’re all focused on the right things and can stop doing the things that don’t matter.” Exactly.

