

The Starbucks Cup of Coffee

Finding consistency & creativity in standard operating procedures



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The cup of joe is an iconic institution that occupies the majority of American mornings. Whether it is the jolt of caffeine or that intoxicating aroma with the same hypnotic effect as fresh popcorn, the cup of coffee has managed to achieve even greater popularity over the last decade. Starbucks has made a commodity morning beverage evolve into a luxurious drink that is even consumed after 5 p.m. (or at least by those who do not fear the resulting caffeine rush).

Starbucks is a \$17 billion corporation that employs close to 200,000 employees worldwide. They have not only changed the marketplace relative to coffee consumption, but they have also changed the lexicon by establishing their own language. You risk looking like you failed the initiation if you order a small decaf, rather than a Grande Frappuccino with soy milk. In the same vein, Starbucks prides its business on a deeper subculture that touts an "infinite list of menu combinations."

That being said, ordering the Grande Frappuccino in the original Starbucks shop near Pike's Place Fish Market in Seattle, Washington, will be the same as ordering it in Land O'Lakes, Florida. It is amazing that a firm of this magnitude, with the number of employees it boasts, can create the same experience every time, for every customer, no matter the situation.

Now consider a normal construction firm. This firm has \$50 million in annual revenue

and approximately 5 to 6 project managers. How many possible combinations or iterations of standard operating procedures exist in your company?

It isn't beyond the realm of possibly to have 7 to 8 versions of a change order log in a firm such as the one mentioned. But why can't a normal construction firm make the "Starbucks cup of coffee?" Your company's goal is to set an achievable standard and deliver it. The following phrases are some of the more common excuses heard in the industry for not mastering standard operating procedures.

"YOU ARE TAKING AWAY OUR CREATIVITY."

This excuse is extremely pervasive in the industry. The moment the phrase "standard operating procedures" is uttered, the artists, formally known as project managers, fear that the "Thought Police" will extract their creative flair from all operations.

First and foremost, the "Thought Police" are not taking away creativity and ingenuity. Where is the creativity in a standard meeting agenda, RFI log or change order summary? Haven't most organizations progressed to a level where these tools should already have a consistent flavor within the company and its workforce?

Consider this: what if the creativity that was spent reinventing a meeting agenda was instead channeled into constructively solving a problem on the jobsite?



It almost appears that a manager would rather recreate the umpteenth version of a change order log just because it may be considered low-hanging fruit. This is a waste of time and money. The real ingenuity and project leadership comes from a manager brainstorming how to build a better project, accelerate a schedule, improve project safety and enhance a project budget.

“WE’RE BECOMING TOO CORPORATE. WE LIKED IT BETTER WHEN WE WERE A FAMILY BUSINESS.”

What does this mean? Does having processes and a standard toolkit for operations mean you shed the mantle of a small entrepreneurial enterprise and enter the stodgy corporate universe?

It is important to peel back the layers of this statement. First, there is a distinct fear that with standard processes comes increased accountability in the company. Without the “Brand X way,” it is easy to avoid the cumbersome hassles of being held accountable in the workplace.

Now consider a family unit. Whatever family structure to which you are accustomed, there is most likely some sort of accountability in place. Most children have chores and tasks to complete, and not completing those tasks leads to some insidious ramifications.

So, even in a familial setting, there are often obligations and a set structure. If an organization has a positive culture,

reinforced by an open-door policy with senior leadership, this should in no way be hindered by having consistency in operations. In fact, the conversations with senior management should be guided by the following management axioms:

- How did your planning go?
- Have you executed your project exit strategy yet?
- How is your project performing relative to the budget?

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Families should have well-defined rules, and so should organizations. Families should have proactive, positive, constant communication, and so should organizations.

“EVERY PROJECT IS DIFFERENT”

Stand in line at any Starbucks and listen to the lingo shouted in the queue. It almost seems as if a normal cup of joe is simply too passé to order. Now consider a firm's backlog. With the exception of certain “brands,” there is very little similarity across

projects. Everyone is different in some small or large detail. In the end, it is important to realize that even though there is an exceptional amount of variability in projects, they all have a beginning, a middle and an end. They have budgets, schedules, meetings, vendors and tradespeople.

Consider this the skeleton. It is impossible to plan every scenario, but at a minimum, there should be a series of proactive processes that guide everyone, from the most green project engineer to the most seasoned veteran manager, through every step.

Once again, leave the skeleton in place. Supplement the framework as work, your company's projects and delivery methodologies change. Channel the real energy into doing what contractors do best: building superior projects.

Now that everyone has a hankering for a half-caffinated, double-tall latte, it is important to note that, regardless of your brand, the process to make the best cup of coffee is what made you a loyal customer in the first place. You visit frequently because of the quality of flavor, the ambiance and the final product.

In the end, your customers should choose you for what you deliver. Construction is often regarded as a commodity business, just like coffee. Be the catalyst for creating your own loyal construction clientele by making the right cup of coffee every time for each specific customer. Just make sure to go easy on the sugar. **CBO**