

Completed Staff Work

“Completed staff work” is the analysis of a problem and the presentation of a solution in such form that all that remains to be done on the part of the supervisor is to approve or disapprove the completed action. The words ‘completed action’ are emphasized because the more difficult the problem, the more the tendency to present the solution in piecemeal fashion or without having thought through the solution thoroughly. In fact, it is the duty of the subordinate to be thorough, including mastery of all details, regardless of the complexity of the matter.

The subordinate must not bother, impose upon or otherwise harass the supervisor to determine those details, no matter how perplexing they might be. Rather, the subordinate should consult other line or staff people, peers and/or any other sources of information, to ensure that once a recommendation is presented to a senior, it is worked out in finished, final form.

The subordinate often has the impulse to ask the supervisor what to do. The more difficult the issue, the more often this occurs. It is very easy to ask the senior what to do. Worse yet, it is easy for the senior to answer. The subordinate must resist the impulse to ask the senior for advice, except if there is a gross lack of clarity regarding the assignment; and, the senior must avoid ‘directing’ the subordinate. It is the responsibility of the subordinate to advise the supervisor of what must be accomplished on the assignment, not to ask the supervisor what should be done; and, for the senior to require such responsibility.

The supervisor needs answers, not questions. The subordinate’s job is to think, analyze, study and consider all the variables affecting the problem, and then fashion (preferably in writing) a single, well-developed proposed course of action -- the best alternative of all those considered. The supervisor approves or disapproves the subordinate’s recommendation. This is possible only when the subordinate’s views are placed before the senior in finished form, so that the senior can make them his views simply by signing his name.

The subordinate never bothers the supervisor with long explanations or memos. If the subordinate does his/her job well, and creates a proper result, the supervisor will see it immediately. If the senior wants comment or explanation, he will ask for it. Explanatory memos are no substitute for completed staff work. Writing a memo to a supervisor rarely constitutes completed staff work. However, writing a memo for your supervisor to send to another party to resolve an issue does constitute quality staff work.

Completed staff work permits a “rough draft”; however, a rough draft must never be an attempt to shift to the senior the burden of formulating action. Rather, completed staff work protects the supervisor from half-baked ideas and/or lengthy memos which fail to resolve issues. The supervisor can thus spend his/her time where it will have the greatest positive impact on the business or the organization. And the subordinate’s completed staff work will find a ready market.

The final test for ‘completed staff work’ is: if you were the senior, would you be willing to sign your name to the recommendation you have prepared, and stake your professional reputation on it being correct? If the answer is anything less than an unqualified “yes”, the subordinate should rework his/her effort because it is not ‘completed staff work.’

- Colonel Lewis R. Webb, USMC

[Edited by Lawrence M. Cassidy: 1985, 1997, 2006, 2010]

NOTE: Colonel Lewis R. Webb, USMC, was my commanding officer for the last two years of my four-year Marine Corps service. Colonel Webb was the 4th Marine Regiment S-3 (Operations). I served as his assistant. Colonel Webb was a man of few words, elegant in both choice and economy of language. Colonel Webb was one of the five most influential men in my life, each different in nature and style. Yet each offered me a special gift: they required me to develop into what I needed to be, to face in life what we all must face, and to do so with a relentless belief that I would be enough to succeed. These are fundamentals of self-confidence and self-esteem, and with character and love, the bedrock upon which 'ordinary' people do difficult things. It is a great gift, one which lasts a lifetime.