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BUSINESS SYSTEMS

When Does Standardization Help a Business Grow, and When Does It Get in the Way?

Which parts of a service should always be done the same way, where people need room to adapt, and how repeated exceptions should change the routine.

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KEY POINTS

- Standardize the parts of a service where inconsistency leads to missed commitments, avoidable rework, or a result the customer cannot rely on.
- Give employees room to adapt the way they work within clear limits. Define which decisions they can make and which changes require agreement from a supervisor or the customer.
- Pay attention to repeated exceptions. They can reveal a routine that needs updating or a customer need that deserves a differently scoped and priced service.

Suppose a cleaning crew arrives at an office and finds the meeting room still in use. The checklist puts that room first. The crew can wait, clean the other rooms first, or leave without doing it. Those choices have different consequences for the customer and for the rest of the shift.

I would let the crew change the order of the work. If the room stays occupied until the end of the visit, someone needs to tell the customer and agree on what happens next. A checklist marked complete would hide the one thing the customer needs to know.

This is where standardization earns its keep: it gives the crew a clear obligation and enough room to meet it under the conditions they actually find. The distinction matters more when a business starts serving several sites and the owner can no longer make every call.

What needs to stay consistent?

For the cleaning company, each crew needs to know which areas are included, what counts as completed work, and how to report anything left unfinished. Those expectations should survive a change of crew. If the business sends someone new to a site, the client should not have to explain the agreement from the beginning.

The order in which rooms are cleaned is a different matter. It may depend on when people leave, which areas can be accessed, and what else needs to be done before the crew moves on. Where changing the sequence leaves the agreed result intact, prescribing every step adds little. Where one step genuinely depends on another, the order is part of the standard and the team should know why.

There is a commercial reason to make this distinction. Fewer missed tasks, return visits, and calls to the supervisor can improve the economics of growth. A company can add sites with a clearer idea of the labour each one needs. It can also say what a regular visit includes without rebuilding its offer every time it quotes a new customer.

Some differences belong in the agreement itself. A client that needs a room ready before a morning event may value a commitment another client does not need. The company can offer that arrangement if it can schedule and price it properly. The site checklist should reflect what was agreed.

When the routine stops serving the customer

A routine carries assumptions about the conditions in which the work takes place. The sequence on the cleaning checklist may have made perfect sense when the office was usually empty at six. Once evening meetings become common, insisting on that sequence can create paid waiting time or push unfinished work onto the next shift.

Richard Rumelt describes how established routines can become a source of inertia when circumstances change.[1] The trouble in this example is easy to miss if the supervisor checks only whether staff followed the schedule. A crew that waits because the meeting room is first on the list can run out of time for the rest of the office. The supervisor needs to know what was completed and what caused the delay.

That does not mean the crew should be free to change the service. Rearranging rooms is within its control. Leaving an agreed task undone, adding another visit, or promising extra work at the same price changes what the customer receives or what the company must provide. Those decisions need a clear owner. Asking for approval each time the crew changes rooms would tie up the supervisor for little benefit; leaving the crew to negotiate the contract on site would create a different problem.

I would make those limits explicit and practise them with the team. Give a new crew two or three situations it is likely to encounter and ask what it would do. If experienced employees give different answers about who can approve a return visit, another page in the manual will help only if it settles that decision.

Give exceptions a way to change the routine

A missed room should leave a short record: what happened, what was agreed with the customer, and whether the crew had to return. That is enough to start a useful discussion. A note that says only “access issue” is less helpful if nobody can tell whether a door was locked once or a weekly meeting regularly runs through the cleaning window.

The record matters because exceptions have different causes. If crews miss rooms because site instructions are unclear, fix the instructions. If the office is predictably occupied at the same time every week, revise the sequence or agree on a new access window. If several customers need a faster response or more frequent visits, find out whether the company can make a viable offer around that need. Repeatedly absorbing extra visits at the original price can make a contract look healthier on paper than it is.

In a study of model changeovers at the NUMMI car plant, Paul Adler, Barbara Goldoftas, and David Levine found that established procedures for changing routines helped the plant combine efficiency with flexibility. Training and trust mattered to how those arrangements worked.[2] A small service business can apply that idea by giving the people who encounter exceptions a way to raise them, and giving someone responsibility for deciding when a change should become part of the regular work.

The next version of the cleaning schedule may need only one change. If the client has moved its weekly meeting to Thursday evenings, move that room to a time when it is free and confirm the arrangement. The crew can then stop solving a problem the business already understands.

REFERENCES

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