

If it ain't broke... *fix it!*

by Sonia F. Caamano

It is the unfortunate reality that inertia is a law of nature that not only affects moving objects and objects at rest, but is also frequently the bane of professionals in their fields. In the daily tedium of trying to empty an ever-full inbox and putting out the unrelenting daily fires, routines become deeply ingrained and any thought of change elicits the inertial response of resistance. Truly a greater force is needed to overcome this inertia and to change the direction of motion.

Some professionals might argue that there is no need for change because everything within their control is working well enough. Not only does that statement fall on disbelieving ears, but it also begs the question, 'Does something have to be broken for you to fix it?' Or is it enough for a process to be outdated or inefficient to merit improvement? And to what degree does the inefficiency need to extend in order to warrant attention and improvement?

While these questions are certainly valid, they nevertheless draw our attention toward an unnecessary analysis of the effectiveness of processes and away from the underlying purpose: combating inertia. It will thus suffice to say that 'broken' or 'ineffective' is truly in the eye of the beholder and is dependent upon the priorities of the person who intends to 'fix' or improve. Far from being the purpose of this text to define the point at which it is valid to act upon the improvement of any particular process or function, instead the purpose is to urge action. Do! Act! Improve! Do whatever you might deem worthwhile within your environs, but at any cost continue to progress and to encourage those around you to do the same. The merit of progress is contained within itself. While the improvements that you effect will certainly hold value, that value will always be supplemented and bolstered by the value contained within the very act of innovating. In short, seek progress for the sake of progress.

Progress for the sake of progress...but without waste!

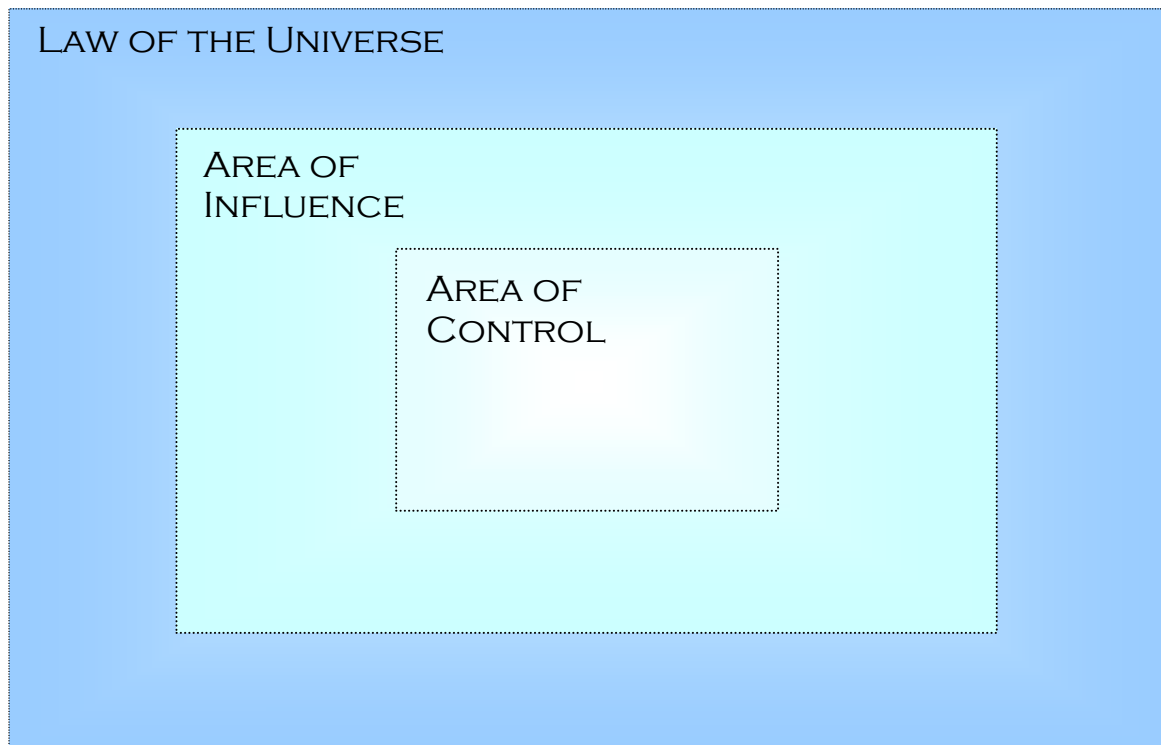
In pursuing the course of action proposed here of combating inertia, you should look for ways to begin immediately. In every workplace there are abundant processes or functions that can be rethought and improved in some way. Consequently, it is not necessary—and almost certainly not advisable!—to wait for something 'big' to change. The big things, the processes that are glaringly ineffective and pleading for reconstruction, are also the ones that will consume the most resources, time, and planning efforts—as well as considerable political dexterity, in many instances. While those are certainly worthwhile endeavors and should undoubtedly be undertaken, they do not lend themselves to more immediate results and rapid progress. Thus, those are not the ones targeted here. Instead, we here look for changes that will lend themselves to a change in habit, a change of mindset. It is frequently the minor improvements that

people can accomplish individually that result in fresh perspectives, renewed energy, and increased ownership of the areas affected.

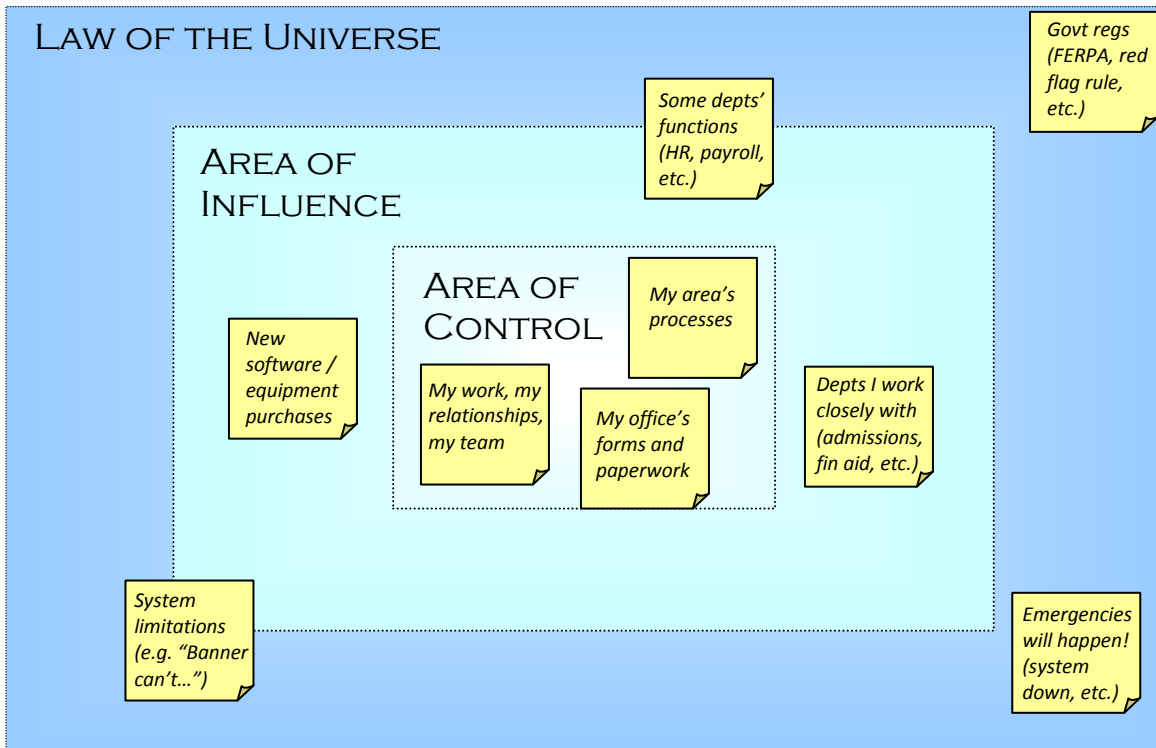
Stay in Your Own Backyard!

While endeavoring to effect improvements to established processes and functions, it is advisable to stay within the area of your control. This does not necessarily mean staying within your own work area. If you have sufficient influence in another area, then you might consider extending your efforts in that direction. In general, however, it is most effective to focus your efforts to your area of responsibility, as it is there that you have both the knowledge and the authority to effect change. While you might be cognizant of areas that, to your perspective, are blatantly in need of some improvement, it does little good to grumble about those if you can't change them. It is important to remember that it does not boost morale—your own or your team's—to complain about a process and not be able to change it. Innovation and progress are as much a team benefit as they are a team effort. To increase that benefit, a team should strive for more frequent successes. Quantity of success by no means makes up for low quality or magnitude, but by accomplishing small and frequent successes, you will build momentum. Moreover, by seeking to effect change in the areas within your own jurisdiction, you will witness those successes more regularly and you will thus reap greater benefits from your labor.

In order to more effectively direct yours and your team's energies it is important to delineate what is within your means to accomplish. The following diagrams are adapted from originals created by Pat Harper, a project manager at Agilent, and they depict the familiar concept of degrees of control—a topic discussed in countless sources, but most notably in Stephen Covey's (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.



Harper suggests that this framing model can be used to map a person's or a team's areas of control and influence, and can be used as a reality check before deciding to undertake any endeavor. Not only does it provide a visual depiction of the areas that one can influence, but it also allows us to map those areas that we should not waste energy trying to change—the so-called 'laws of the universe.' In using this tool, it is critical to remember that this model must be individualized. What might lay outside of one person's area of influence will in fact be within someone else's area of control.



This diagram can be used as a development tool for teams. Problem, issues, and concerns can be mapped in different areas of the chart. Those in the center can be responded to more easily, while the ones towards the peripheries can be strategized or sometimes simply accepted as realities. Over time, a team will discover ways to move some items inwards and will thereby gain the reward of witnessing the areas of control and influence expand over time.

Whether you choose to use the referenced framing model or another technique of your preference, the point is that you should aspire to use your energies to the greatest extent by focusing on what is within your capacity to change—even if it does mean stretching out into the area of influence from time to time.

Ideas and more ideas!

The first step to effecting change and progress is to generate ideas. A method of targeting potential areas to improve is to think of the tasks or processes that people dislike the

most. Those are generally the best candidates for improvement. If your staff unanimously dislike performing a certain function, then there is most likely something about it that can be improved in order to make the function more effortless or more interesting—or to even eliminate it.

Encourage your staff to give you ideas. Staff members at all levels have good feedback on what does or doesn't work. Even student assistants or junior staff will have constructive input. Most of the best feedback I have collected has been from student workers. Since they are inevitably the ones doing the lowest denominator tasks, they also have the advantage of seeing what problems exist at a foundational level. Moreover, their youth and inexperience often act as a boon; they will not be as sensitive to politics, so they will frequently give you the most candid feedback. Beware, however, of having idea sessions develop into complaint sessions. Rather than dwelling on problems, keep asking the question, "What can we do about it?" If the answer is truly 'nothing,' then make a note of the problem, post in the Laws of the Universe section of your diagram and move on to a new topic.

While collecting ideas from your team, it also is important to not turn down any of them. Some of the ideas and feedback—in fact, many of them!—will be inadvisable or even impossible to implement. Nonetheless, all of these ideas have intrinsic value and should be received as such. Even if the idea is not feasible, the creativity alone has value and changes the direction of your team. Your team will begin seeing problems as opportunities for improvement, and they will also understand that they can effect change instead of being the passive recipients of outdated or problematic processes.

Get off the hamster wheel!

Once you have ideas, you should immediately pursue one or more of the best ones. Too often ideas will be generated but no action will be taken, and the idea is then set aside indefinitely and even forgotten. The frequent complaint is that we are all exceedingly busy. While this is unquestionably true, it should not prevent you from developing ideas and progressing. Most inboxes are perpetually full. No matter how fast you work to dig out of that hole, you never truly get ahead. As such, taking an hour or two from an already full work week to develop something new should not be a tremendous setback. If you are truly implementing an improvement—however small—the value added will compensate for the invested time. Moreover, further value is brought by having motivated your team to progress and inspired them to look critically at existing systems.

Keep moving forward!

Without progress, people and systems stagnate and ultimately decline. It is not enough to attempt to maintain an existing system. Customers, resources, goals, and priorities change gradually over time, and in order to operate most effectively, professionals must likewise evolve. Introducing frequent improvements and progress into a work environment also introduces comparable momentum into a work team and allows them to move in the direction of greater quality—be that in efficiency, in service to customers, or in any other targeted area. Not only can you thus achieve improvement in the tangible

procedures and processes, but you can also create a progressive mindset: one that desires improvements and searches for ways to bring them about.

Therefore act upon improvements! Effect change! Develop ideas! Seek small improvements you can accomplish and act upon them. Do this regularly and not only will you reap the benefits of the change you effected, but you will infuse your work environment with a desire to progress and a belief that such progress is feasible.



About the Author:

Sonia Caamano is the Associate Registrar at the University of San Francisco. She has worked at USF, her alma mater, in various roles since 2003.