

The Clay Brief

WHAT SHOULD WE STOP DOING?

Issue No. 003

Institutional maturity is not only knowing what to build. It is knowing what no longer needs to remain.

Organizations are remarkably good at adding.

A problem emerges. A control is introduced.

A risk appears. An approval is added.

A new priority arises. A report, committee, or process follows.

Most additions begin for good reasons.

But institutions rarely develop the same discipline for subtraction.

Over time, yesterday's solutions can quietly become today's bureaucracy.

Reports continue long after anyone uses them meaningfully.

Committees meet because they have always met.

Approvals remain even when the risks that justified them have changed.

Processes accumulate steps, but few people remember why each step exists.

The result is not always visible failure.

Sometimes it is something quieter: institutional drag.

Decisions take longer.

Employees spend more time navigating the organization than serving its purpose.

Managers review matters that could be decided elsewhere.

And scarce institutional attention is consumed by activities that may no longer create sufficient value.

The question for leaders, therefore, is not only "What more should we introduce?"

Sometimes the more important question is, "What should we have the courage to stop?"

WHY IT MATTERS

Every unnecessary process has a cost, even when that cost does not appear in a budget.

It consumes: Time. Attention. Decision-making capacity. Organizational energy.

Simplification is therefore not merely an efficiency exercise. Done thoughtfully, it is an act of institutional stewardship.

BOARDROOM QUESTION

If we were designing this institution today, knowing what we know now, what would we choose not to create?

The answers may reveal processes that have outlived their purpose.

CLAY TOOL : The Institutional Stop List

Once a year, ask every leadership team to identify:

One report that may no longer be necessary.

One approval that could safely be delegated or removed.

One committee or meeting whose purpose should be reconsidered.

One process that could be simplified.

One activity the institution continues largely because “we have always done it.”

Then ask three questions:

1. What purpose was this originally designed to serve?

2. Does that purpose still exist?

3. Is there now a simpler way to achieve it?

Do not automatically remove what is old. Some long-standing systems endure because they work.

But require everything to earn the right to remain.

CAUTION

Simplification is not the removal of necessary controls. A process may feel inconvenient precisely because it protects something important: public resources, safety, quality, fairness, or accountability.

The goal is therefore not fewer controls at all costs.

It is the right controls for the right risks at the right level.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Healthy institutions periodically examine not only what they need to begin, but also what they need the wisdom to end.

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Building Institutions That Endure.

Through Strategy. Through Systems. Through Stewardship.

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