

The Clay Papers

Paper No.3

When Good Systems Become Bad Bureaucracy

The purpose of a system is not to create more processes. It is to make good work easier to do consistently.

There is a moment in the life of many growing institutions when an entirely reasonable idea begins to go wrong.

A problem occurs.

A new procedure is introduced.

Another problem occurs.

Another approval is added.

Something goes wrong again.

A committee is created.

A form follows.

Then a report.

Then another layer of review.

Each decision, considered individually, may make perfect sense.

Yet years later, the institution discovers something strange.

It has accumulated an impressive architecture of control and made it increasingly difficult for people to do their work.

This is one of the paradoxes of institution-building.

Institutions need systems to endure.

But systems themselves can become obstacles to the very work they were designed to strengthen.

The difference lies in whether we remember what systems are for.

Systems Are Means, Not Ends

A good system should help an institution answer some basic questions.

Who is responsible?

What should happen?

When should it happen?

How do we know it happened well?

What do we do when something goes wrong?

These questions create clarity.

Clarity makes good performance more repeatable.

*But somewhere along the way, organizations can begin confusing **the existence of a process with the effectiveness of a process.***

A procedure exists; therefore, the problem must be managed.

A committee meets; therefore, governance must be working.

A report is submitted; therefore, accountability must have occurred.

A form has been completed; therefore, quality must have been assured.

But institutions are not strengthened by the number of systems they possess.

They are strengthened by whether those systems actually help people make better decisions, manage risk, learn, coordinate, and serve.

The distinction matters.

*Because bureaucracy often begins when **the evidence that work has been done becomes more important than the work itself.***

Every Control Has a Cost

Controls are necessary.

Approvals protect resources.

Policies create consistency.

Documentation preserves institutional memory.

Reviews reduce error.

Governance mechanisms protect institutions from arbitrary decision-making.

But every control also consumes something.

Time.

Attention.

Judgement.

Speed.

Sometimes trust.

This does not mean controls are undesirable.

*It means they should be **designed deliberately**.*

A mature institution does not simply ask: What additional control can we introduce?

*It also asks: **What risk does this control address, and is the burden proportionate to that risk?***

That second question is rarely as exciting as introducing a new framework.

But it may be one of the most important questions in institutional design.

Because systems accumulate easily. They disappear reluctantly.

The Sedimentation of Institutions.

Perhaps bureaucracy is best understood not as something organizations deliberately create but as something that settles over time.

One generation introduces a process to solve a particular problem.

The problem changes.

The process remains.

Another layer is added.

Then another.

Eventually, few people remember why some procedures exist.

They simply know: "That is how we do things here."

This is institutional sedimentation.

And it creates a quiet danger. Organizations become very good at preserving yesterday's solutions while confronting tomorrow's problems.

Strong institutions therefore need more than the discipline to build systems.

*They need the courage to **retire them**.*

Simplification Is Also Institution-Building

We often associate institution-building with adding things.

New policies. New frameworks. New structures. New controls. New committees.

But sometimes the most important institutional work is subtraction.

Removing an unnecessary approval.

Combining two reports.

Closing a committee whose purpose has expired.

Simplifying a procedure.

Automating a repetitive task.

Giving a competent employee enough authority to make a decision without escalating it through five levels.

This work rarely attracts attention.

There is no ribbon-cutting ceremony for a process that now takes two days instead of fourteen.

Yet these improvements can profoundly change how an institution functions.

Perhaps one mark of institutional maturity is this:

The ability to distinguish what must be controlled from what should simply be trusted.

Good Systems Preserve Human Judgement

There is another danger in over-engineered institutions.

People stop thinking. The procedure becomes the answer.

"I followed the process."

Sometimes that is exactly what should happen.

But no procedure can anticipate every circumstance.

Strong institutions therefore do something subtle.

They create enough structure to produce consistency but enough discretion to allow judgment.

That balance is difficult.

Too little structure creates chaos.

Too much structure creates paralysis.

Institutional excellence often lives somewhere between the two.

The Stewardship Question

Every generation of leaders inherits systems.

Some should be protected.

Some should be strengthened.

Some should be redesigned.

And some should be allowed to end.

The responsibility of stewardship is not to preserve everything we inherit.

It is to ask whether what we inherited still serves the institution's purpose.

That requires humility.

Because sometimes the system that needs changing is one we created ourselves.

Reflection

Perhaps every institution should periodically place its systems on trial.

Not because systems are the enemy.

But because systems should always remain servants of purpose.

*We might ask: **If we were designing this institution today, knowing what we know now, would we still design this process this way?***

If the answer is no, perhaps tradition alone is not enough reason to keep it.

Enduring institutions do not merely accumulate systems.

They learn. They simplify. They adapt. They preserve what matters.

And they have the courage to let go of what no longer does.

Because the goal was never to build bureaucracy.

*The goal was to build an institution capable of doing good work **consistently, responsibly, and long after any one of us has left.***

Sarah Eden Asiimwe

Building Institutions That Endure.

Through Strategy. Through Systems. Through Stewardship.

