

SOP – Standard Operating PRINCIPLES

Introduction.

You probably know what the acronym “SOP” stands for. “Standard Operating Procedures”. “Statement Of Position”. “Same Old Problem”. Here, of course, we refer to “Standard Operating Procedures”. We all know they are essential for the efficient workings of any organization that employs more than one person. So why introduce this term called Standard Operating PRINCIPLES?



One characteristic of living things is the ability to adapt to the environment. Changing colours of the skin when moving against differently-coloured backgrounds. Growing roots to reach water deeper underground when drought prevails. Migrating to places where conditions support any particular species’ requirements for survival. Members of the Animal and Plant Kingdoms appear to take constantly adapting to changing conditions in stride. Do organizations do so too?

One of the documents, or sets of documents, that need frequent and periodic updating is an organization’s SOPs. Failure to do that results in all sorts of situations that usually add friction where friction is not beneficial. Friction is required for movement, of course, but friction also eats away at moving parts and slows down processes unnecessarily. More than that, outdated SOPs are a symptom of the worst kind of friction. That sort of friction takes place in the collective language and psyche of the organization. Words have a way of determining our thoughts, attitudes and behaviours. Sometimes just changing a word or two can have greatly beneficial effects on our people’s behaviour. This of course translates into organizational behaviour.

So, here we will define Standard Operating PRINCIPLES as an organization’s adoption of a set of universal, non-negotiable principles that determine how individuals within the organization think, speak and act when those principles are applied in everyday working life. Each organization needs to determine for herself what those principles are. If you would like some for a start, I can suggest looking up [Future Achievement’s MAXIMIZERS™ Principles](#), the [49 character qualities](#) as defined by [Character First!](#) or the [Josephson Institute’s Six Pillars of Character](#).

I believe that applying Standard Operating PRINCIPLES throughout your organization will bring you to much greater heights. And help you stay there and beyond. I discuss briefly six areas where application of Standard Operating PRINCIPLES can help you in organic growth. Change your words and outlook, change your world. Those six areas are:



1. Strategic Posture.
2. Organizational Robustness.
3. Organizational Adaptability.

4. Change Management.
5. Deliberate Growth.
6. Deliberate Reproduction.

1. **Strategic Posture.**

Would you rather adopt a strategic posture or take a strategic position? A matter of semantics, you think? Think again. We change our posture several times an hour. Indeed, we probably change our posture at least a few times a minute, even when we are writing long articles at the computer. Our bodies are used to shifting and changing postures. We take postural changes in stride. However, when we think of “positions”, we seem to think of relatively fixed positions. Positions can of course be changed, but somehow they don’t seem as flexible as postures.

By the way, there is absolutely nothing wrong with taking up a strategic position. Just make sure that you are postured, when in that position, to be ready to move at an instant’s notice. To another position, perhaps. We have here the application of the Standard Operating *Principle* of “Flexibility” or “Realign Rigorously”. This, by the way, also helps in dealing with the dilemmas we often encounter. Frank Buytendijk describes those very well in his book “[Dealing with dilemmas](#)”. I recommend you read it.



If you are thinking that being flexible, being able to adopt a different strategic posture at any moment is impossible where large organizations are concerned, consider comparing a blue whale and a supertanker. Let’s assume that the supertanker is fully loaded and travelling at normal cruising speed. If she suddenly needs to change course, she might take between 15 minutes to half an hour before she actually finds herself on that new course. The blue Whale doesn’t need 15 minutes to half an hour to dive if it’s on the surface, it dives immediately! Thinking in terms of “posture” rather than “position” would, I believe, help the organization think more strategically as a whole.

2. **Organizational Robustness.**

The Master Weapon?

An article in the Jan 1991 issue of [Military Review](#) (see page 62 onwards) described what the author envisaged to be the *Master Weapon* of the time – the attack helicopter. I agree fully with what he said, and also the spirit in which it was said. What I would like to caution you on is this – thought leaders produce a lot of good stuff. It’s just that the good stuff has to be enjoyed, ingested, digested and assimilated properly before the eater derives any benefit from all that good stuff. What many of us do is something like this. We read the article on attack helicopters being the new “master weapon”. We get really excited about it, and run off to buy a few Brigades’ worth of such toys. We force the rest of the Army to be organized and to think around our new toys. Instead of assimilating and applying the principles of J.F.C. Fuller’s thinking, we grab what looks like the panacea for all our ills and stuff ourselves with what we think is something like the elixir of renewal.

This is the same kind of thinking that people adopt when they subject themselves to “specific weight training”, “specific weight loss programs” and the like. I am not against such programs, they have their place. The trouble is when people adopt those programs as the “be all, end all” program for their health and fitness.

Organizations do the same thing. SAP is too complicated? Just replace it with a simpler system that does the same thing. Job Descriptions are a thing of the past? Let’s have Balanced Scorecards for each Section, then! Hierarchical organizations are too unwieldy for today’s business environment? Get rid of them, replace them with flat structures that somehow know what to do and are automatically aligned with your higher purpose.

While innovative solutions are always treasured, let’s integrate them fully into what we have. Otherwise they won’t be innovations, just new inclusions that will prove irritating, if not fatal, in the long run. We need to improve in organizational “Endurance” if we are to “Stay the Course”.

Auftragstaktik.

This is a term from the *Bundeswehr*, the German Armed Forces, and it means “[Mission-minded Tactics](#)” (Go to page 3). It is the job of leaders at all levels, whether in the *Bundeswehr* or in any business unit, to ensure that their people perform their jobs so well that the leaders are able to focus on their primary roles of supervising (making sure you do your job well) and directing (making sure that combined efforts are in the right direction). One of the dreams many business leaders indulge in is to have a staff that leads itself in doing what it needs to do to give maximum value without needing to be reminded every ten minutes.

Well, this does not have to be a dream. It is well within the reach of all leaders today. Invest the time and effort to recruit and retain the right people, and you will be well on your way there! Also remember, it’s not the people you fire who give you heartaches, it’s the people you don’t!

3. Organizational Adaptability.



Irreducible Complexity.

This is a term which describes a system that cannot be simplified any further, otherwise it will not work at all. For instance, I could remove all the doors and most of the body of a car. I could take away the air-conditioning unit. I could perhaps remove all the seats except for the driver’s. However, I could not remove one of the wheels or the car would grind to a halt in very short order. There comes a time when I cannot remove any more items or the car would simply not work.

What are some of the irreducible systems in your organization? Is it a person? A team? Find out what they are and you would then be able to base any reorganizations around those discrete units.

Organizational Charts.

Are you able to have “Plug and Play” organizational charts? Would you like to be so flexible that “reorganizations” are taken in stride, as they pose no threat to employees or to organizational effectiveness? Is your HR Administration able to support such flexibility in terms of payroll, benefits, etc? If you have infrastructure as in a manufacturing concern, how portable is your infrastructure, or are you able to sell it off when necessary?

Organizational adaptability is essentially a matter of mindsets. Once mindsets become flexible, it is much easier for your organization to become much more adaptable than it is now.

Dynamic Job Descriptions.

It is commonly lamented that Job Descriptions remain static while the actual work required seems to expand at an ever-increasing pace. Can we have job descriptions that grow together with the individual? Would the HR apparatus be able to support that? For a start, Job Descriptions would probably need constant review until we are able to craft them in such a way they would remain relevant as the organization morphs to meet changing and/or growing needs as signalled by all stakeholders. When was your last review?

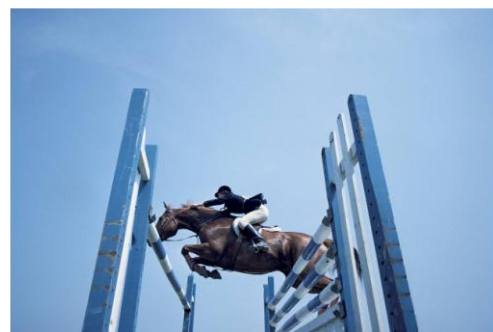
4. Change Management.

Kaizen.

The philosophy of kaizen is about small daily improvements, not only about business processes, but also about making the workplace a better place to work in. If you are in the habit of making small daily improvements, you would be in a much better position to adapt when adaptation is needed. Implementing a kaizen culture in your workplace pays great dividends, but only as much as top management is seen to be embracing it as well. Are you ready for kaizen?

Quantum Leaps.

Incremental improvements are necessary and ought to be part of your organization’s psyche. However, there will be times when changes seem to be akin to leaping across great, yawning chasms. If you wake up one morning and discover that powered suits allowing people to move at 100 kph across any kind of terrain and leap 10 storeys high are now here in quantity and available to almost anyone in the street, I suppose you would think that it’s great cause for celebration. Unless you’re in the auto manufacturing business, that is. If so, then you’ve obviously allowed yourself to be blindsided and you need to take massive corrective action if you are even going to survive as a business. Having deep pockets would certainly help there!

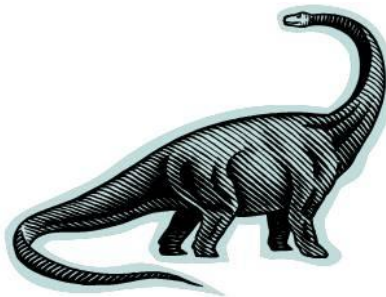


5. Deliberate Growth.

In order for Deliberate Growth to be sustainable, you need to establish a culture where good character and leadership attributes are encouraged daily. This in no way implies that you make your people “goody two shoes” out of whom you may exact great work at very low cost. People of good character will not agree with you about everything, not because they are thinking about their own benefits, but because it simply may not be right. You would do well to ensure that you retain such people in your organization.

Deliberate Growth starts with you, the Leader. Make growth your personal priority, and your organization will grow as well!

6. Deliberate Reproduction.



There are probably upper limits as to how large a corporation can grow and still have a recognizable *raison d’etre*. Any organization growing too large would probably need to spawn other organizations. To illustrate, in a study of how large dinosaur eggs could probably have been, fifty centimetres, or about twenty inches, seems to have been the largest. Larger eggs would probably have collapsed under their own weight simply because the shells could not have been too thick or oxygen and carbon dioxide would not have been able to diffuse in and out quickly enough for the growing embryo.

Do you have a need to “spin off” segments of your organization that are not part of your core business? Do so without trepidation, for mutually beneficial relationships can always be forged by such spinoffs. Indeed, have a spirit of generosity and allocate such resources as are necessary for those daughter companies to be able to be productive as soon as possible. After all, you would want suppliers and other service providers for your organization to have a close relationship with you and be as reliable as possible, wouldn’t you?

Conclusion.

When embarking upon the journey of developing your SOPs, keep an open mind and be ready to assimilate and discard what works and what does not work for you where application of principles is concerned. It is not the adoption of SOPs that you should be mainly concerned about – it is what your organization becomes as a result of incorporating those SOPs. It is then that those six things we talked about become natural, executed without deliberate thinking. When that happens, you’ll be ready for the next stage of growth.