



Clean Out Your Clutter

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Most of us need a reminder once in a while to clean out our clutter. This article is about the topic of clutter in various parts of our lives and how we need to keep it from building up. If you have the personal discipline never to have a cluttered desk or workbench, stop reading and give yourself a medal for being so organized. The rest of us will pick apart the concept of clutter and find some coping mechanisms.

First, it would be good to identify exactly what clutter is. Clutter is that set of things (or ideas) that once served a useful purpose in our lives, but now are no longer useful. For example, if you look in your cupboard or pantry, you are likely to find some condiments or food items that expired over a year ago. If you think about it, these items are not safe to eat, and you will never use them. They remain on the shelf taking up valuable space, but they will not be consumed by you or anyone else. To throw them out would be the smart thing to do, but we continue to work around these artifacts and simply refuse to do what is obviously right.

Look in your closet. There are probably clothes in there that you intellectually know you will never wear again. Your body shape is not going to return to the size that would allow these items ever to be wearable by you, and you cannot legitimately give them to someone else. Yet, year after year, they remain in your closet taking up space and leaving the place a cluttered mess.

Keeping clutter is not just a bad habit for people; it is also a problem for organizations. In any organization, there are procedures and processes that have no current purpose, but we continue to do them out of momentum. They sap energy and time from our current operation, but we fail to stop them. An example might be a daily report that nobody pays any attention to anymore. It may be the ancient Mimeograph supplies in the stationery cabinet. They will sit there for decades in their unopened boxes, even though the Mimeograph machine was tossed out in 1975. You probably have ink cartridges or toner for printers that no longer exist in your office. The list goes on and on. Spare parts for machines we no longer own; old Christmas decorations; trade show

posters collecting dust; a broken vase; these are all items that can be found in most office store rooms, and there are thousands of other examples if you think about it.

There is also mental clutter that clogs our brains with old ideas that do not apply in our current world, or maybe never did apply very well. For example, many managers still practice a "command and control" philosophy, clinging to the ancient belief that in order to get things done they need to scare people into compliance. Managers may believe that to "motivate" people, all they need to do is add some extrinsic goodies like t-shirts, pizza parties, or hat days. Those ideas went out with Herzberg's Two Factor Theory over 60 years ago, yet every day I still see managers trying to motivate people with extrinsic rewards.

How can we get a handle on clutter and remove much of it from our lives? To start with, we need to be able to actually see the clutter in a different form than we usually do. I think one way is to do campaigns where we remove every single bottle of lotion or shampoo from a cupboard and then only replace those items we are likely to use in the future. You can do one cupboard or closet a day and have an entire room cleaned up in a week. You can set aside three consecutive days on your calendar to do the garage or attic. Just be sure to have a dumpster handy and a wheel barrow to carry the junk out to it.

With the office procedures, why not have a "clean out" day where we challenge all of the rituals and things that take up our time. There is a formal process for this called "work out." The idea is to take the useless work out of our processes so we can spend our precious time only on the things that matter, thus de-cluttering our processes. The concepts of lean thinking and "5S" principles are particularly helpful for these clean out activities.

With edible condiments and drug or cosmetic items, the rule is to buy only what you intend to use. Use up each item and throw away the container before you purchase a replacement. If you use 3/4 of the bottle, then buy a replacement, eventually you will have cupboards full of 1/4 full bottles and no room for any new ones, plus you will spend 25% more for your cosmetics than you need to. Use what you have before opening a new jar.

The benefits of cleaning out your clutter is that you make room to put the vital few things for your current existence front and center where they are readily available and not hidden among the piles of useless garbage that has built up over the years. In the event that you need to downsize your environment in the future (and we all eventually do) you will need to throw out the clutter anyway, why not start now and enjoy some more usable resources today.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

