

The next table will be yours

This Column is called “Practical Process” and there is nothing more practical than queuing for a popular restaurant that does not take reservations. Doing so during my first visit to India made for a great opportunity for introspection about process change. Let me tell you the story.

The queue

We arrived at the restaurant keen to take the lift to level 24 where a revolving restaurant would give us a great night-time view of Delhi. About 100 others had the same idea at roughly the same time. It’s about 8 PM and the temperature is 35C (95F) and humidity is very high—standard Delhi summer weather.

This restaurant does not take phone or online reservations, but when you arrive you can give your name and number of table places needed to a man sitting at a desk near the lift doors. Then when an appropriate table is available in the restaurant, i.e. a table of the same capacity as the size of your party, two in our case), your name is called. So don’t be too far away, i.e. continue to crowd around the desk and keep asking is it your turn yet.

The man at the desk is calmly taking names, answering phone calls from the restaurant, calling the restaurant, walking through the milling crowd looking for the current lucky winners, and generally having at least three conversations at once. Did I mention that he is wearing a suit and tie and not raising a literal or figurative sweat? With 100 people in the queue there are at least 100 mobile phones (cellphones) and many of those are finding friends already in the restaurant who are now calling the desk to say “send our friends up, we’ll make room at our table”.

All the time the lift is arriving to release replete diners and to take on new passengers to restock the newly empty tables. Naturally, this creates surges of people coming and going through the crowd around the lift and the desk where the maître d' (if you can have that in an Indian restaurant) is still calmly having several conversations, searching for lost diners, dealing with customer questions, and all the while balancing supply and demand. With translation help from my Indian colleague, I understand that the standard response to most questions is that “the next table will be yours”.

Well this looks like fertile ground for a couple of process management and improvement specialists! While we wait why don’t we work out how to fix this obviously broken process? The process is quite straightforward: arrive-register-wait-enter-eat-depart. Lots of things we can change. Surely there is a better way to get

people to line up nicely. Our man at the desk is using a notebook, a paper one, and a pencil. We could automate that. Diners are spending random amounts of time at the top and we could standardize that. What about an online system with a smart phone app. Of course there are plenty of things we can do to fix this broken process!

What's the problem?

As I stand there watching this apparent chaotic process, however, it starts to dawn on me that this is actually working, and working well. People are going up to the restaurant. Yes, there is a delay, but it's not overly long (and not as long as it feels at 35C with high humidity!). Apart from a moment of crowd-sourced governance when it seems someone tried to slip into the lift ahead of turn and the crowd reacted swiftly and loudly, there is little aggression and the waiting is done patiently (much more patiently than in the queue I had seen (from a distance!) at a first class check-in counter at JFK airport a few days before!).

What is going on here? Is this apparently chaotic circumstance revealing itself to be an optimized, self-regulating, and sophisticated process that is delivering the right outcomes? Would intervention by the processes analysts in the room improve performance or destroy the process? The longer I watched the process unfold before me the more I could see that there was a rhythm and purpose that was delivering order from the chaos. Indeed this was not chaos at all, but a well-controlled, if complex, system that was being managed well based on considerable experience. Of course it wasn't perfect, but I came to see that it wasn't as broken as it first seemed.

The lynchpin

Whatever else is happening in this process, we must acknowledge that it is the 'man at the desk' who is keeping it all together. I know nothing about him except what I might surmise from watching his work. Unflappable, certainly. Multi-tasking, obviously. Focused on delivering the best outcomes, undoubtedly. What he is doing is not particularly complicated; his knowledge and skills could easily be taught to others. What might be harder to create in another is his attitude. There's no doubt that it is his seemingly sanguine approach to controlling the 'chaos' that is allowing the process to work.

Lessons learned

What can we learn from this small slice of Delhi life?

The most obvious lesson is that we must be careful about making assumptions about process performance, especially if we are in a new environment. A stranger's view of a process can be valuable, but it can also be wrong.

We must always challenge our presumptions about what good looks like. Just because a process is working differently from our personal experience, does not mean that it is broken. A process delivers value to its stakeholders and we might need to look a little more closely to test if that is happening.

Could this process be improved? Almost certainly, as is the case for every process. We would be well advised, however, to think long and hard about any 'obvious' changes. Despite the surface appearance this is a sophisticated and complex process and chaotic, messy processes may well already be optimized.

We could automate parts of the process, we could give our 'man at the desk' an iPad, diners could be given a fixed length of stay in the restaurant, and we could reconfigure some aspects of the process. This may well streamline some of the logistics, it may improve some of the mechanical aspects of the exercise. I wonder though if it might also detract from the drama and theatre of the 'performance'? It's not always about efficiency.

Thanks

Thanks to my friend and colleague, Amit Chauhan, the Principal of Q3edge Consulting, our partner in India, for his hospitality in taking me to the restaurant and creating a valuable opportunity to see and learn. In turn and without too much delay, we did find our way up to the restaurant and had a very enjoyable meal.

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