

Create Accountability with the PRoPeLS Pattern

Being a manager means you're 100% responsible for everything that happens in your unit, and everything that fails to happen, whether you know about it or not.

This is a huge level of responsibility.

In order to accept this responsibility -- while not actually doing all the work yourself -- you need to create systems to ensure things happen.

Ensuring things happen is not trivial. Humans have been trying to address this challenge for millennia.

- Oldest management question ever: How do I get people to do what I tell them to do?
- Second oldest management question ever: How can I be sure people did what I told them to do?

The best pattern I've seen for dealing with this is the five-element PRoPeLS Pattern: Policy, Role, Procedure, Log, and Standard.

1. As a manager, you set out the general rule describing what you need -- that restrooms be clean, that visitors be badged, or that expenses be managed.
2. You assign each responsibility (for clean restrooms, etc.) to a specific role in the firm.
3. You sketch out the steps to follow to bring about the desired result.
4. You require the work to be logged.
5. You define just the standards that people need to support them to achieve success delivering what you said you need.

The five elements of PRoPeLS are simple. But if you don't know that all these elements go together, you miss a glorious opportunity to improve your management game. If one or more of the five is missing, or if you jumble some of the elements together, you can create big enforcement and maintenance problems for yourself and your team.

Here are shorter and longer definitions of each, followed by an example.

Shorter Definitions

- Policy: what the organization wants to have be true.
- Role: which role in the organization is responsible for making the policy be true.
- Procedure: a series of action steps that make the policy be true.
- Log: a record of events such as each time the Procedure was run, and by whom.
- Standard: measure for telling when the policy is true. A collection of specifications referenced by the policy.

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Longer Definitions

- Policy: "the correct or expected behavior of an entity." "The goal of a policy is to help the organization function properly." This states management's intent for what should happen or what should be true. Doesn't dictate how. Example: Every visitor is issued a Visitor's Badge. A Policy is best thought of as "a decision made in advance." Policies are adopted by governing bodies, or by those with positional power derived from those bodies. Policies are expressions of positional power. I believe a good policy should be accompanied by the Why behind it.
Example: To control access to firm property and enhance safety, every visitor is issued a Visitor's Badge.
- Role: a part of the Policy that states who (by role) owns the carrying out of the Policy. This is the person whose job it is to follow through on enacting the policy. Example: only a qualified receptionist may issue a Visitor's Badge.
- Procedure: a set of steps that, if followed, would enact the policy. (An example would be the series of steps one would follow to issue the visitor's badge.)
- Log: a record of each time an event occurred, such as when you (or your delegatee) ran the Procedure, and what happened. (An example would be the log of badges issued, including who issued each badge, the badge number, who received the badge, the date and time of issuance and the date and time the badge was returned.)
- Standard: a detailed, quantifiable description of some aspect of the Policy or Procedure -- often, one that you wish to share across policies or Procedures, such as a definition of what "clean" means, or minimum standards for the visitor's badge. Standards can include anything from the dimensions of a USB-C connector to a firm's coding standards for software. Example: the Visitor's Badge is at least 2 inches high, four inches wide, with lettering that can be read clearly from at least 10 feet away.

You've probably made use of the PRoPeLS pattern yourself thousands of times. You've probably invented a few, in at least partial form.

An Example - Cleaning Restrooms

As a restaurant manager you want to establish clear ownership of your Clean Restroom Policy.

Setting the Policy

First, should your policy talk about the act of cleaning, or the state of being clean? Notice the difference:

- Each restroom must be cleaned at least hourly.

- Each restroom is kept clean. A restroom is clean when it conforms to the Clean Restroom Standard.

I prefer to completely separate the Policy ("must be clean") from any description of HOW it is accomplished. If you're working the graveyard shift and nobody has used the restroom in three hours, do you still need to clean it three times? Probably not. Should you walk through and verify it hourly? Probably yes -- someone could have used it messily without your awareness.

Assigning Responsibilities to Roles

If nobody owns the work, it's not going to get done reliably. Think of the phrase, "That's not my job." Assign responsibility for the policy to one or more roles, and assign the roles to people, in such a way that each person knows exactly when the carrying out of the policy is, indeed, their job. Always include role name(s) in the policy's assignment statement(s), and optionally include the policy name in their job description.

Example clause in the Policy assignment statement:

- The busboy is responsible for ensuring the restrooms are kept clean according to the Clean Restroom Policy, and for executing the steps of the Cleaning the Restroom Procedure.
- The manager is responsible for ensuring that the Clean Restroom Policy is upheld.
- Authority for updating the Cleaning the Restroom Procedure rests with the manager.
- Authority for updating the Clean Restroom Standard rests with the owner.

Example clause in the Busboy Job Description:

- The busboy is responsible for ensuring the restrooms are kept clean according to the Clean Restroom Policy, and for executing the steps of the Cleaning the Restroom Procedure.

Defining the Procedure

The Procedure is the series of steps that, when carried out, reliably delivers the result the Policy is asking for. Procedures can be quite lengthy -- here's a sample from Imperial Dade, [The Ultimate Guide to Cleaning Your Commercial Restroom in 14 Steps](#). A good Procedure will include preparation steps, a list of required equipment and supplies, and notes on how to verify you've done a good job.

Example text from the Imperial Dade procedure: Remove any debris from in and around the toilet and urinals. Place any urinal strainers in a bucket of disinfectant solution. Flush the toilet to make sure it is clear and working properly. Remove all visible soils with a multi-purpose cleaner or cleaner/disinfectant. (See the full Procedure at the link above.)

A good Procedure is hugely helpful in empowering staff to deliver quality results. I strongly suggest you have your top performers create and revise your key Procedures and that you encourage suggestions and improvements. As Sam Carpenter says in Work the System, "If a staff member recommends a change, and affiliated staff and direct management concur, the working procedure [Procedure] will be tweaked instantly."

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Sample steps from a Procedure:

1. Knock to announce yourself
2. Place the Wet Floor sign in the doorway and block the door with the Being Cleaned sign
3. Dust countertops, sweep floor, and empty garbage
4. Clean toilets and urinals by... (sub-steps)
5. ...etc...

Inspired by Scranton Products' "[7 Steps for Cleaning Your Commercial Restroom](#)."

Creating a Log

A Log is a business record of events that occur that are relevant to the business. No policy is complete without a log, because the log provides proof or evidence of the policy being enacted. You should log each instance when a Procedure is carried out. Include the date, time, individual doing the work, and any other details needed to track compliance with the Policy. (Logs are also important for recording incidents! Any "business event" is a candidate for logging.)

Make it clear to your people that falsifying a Log is illegal and, depending on severity, could be a firable offense. A person who is found guilty of falsifying a document may face civil penalties such as fines or a loss of professional license.

Where the Procedure helps staff do the work, the Log helps management have visibility into what work got done. If there is no Log, there is neither auditability nor accountability.

Referencing a Standard

A Standard is a place to answer the question "at what quality?" Lewis Eisen defines a Standard as a collection of specifications. Standards get adopted (and empowered) by a Policy that references them. Example statements from a Standard:

- A restroom is 'clean' when it conforms to the following:
 - Floors are free of debris and dirt
 - Porcelain surfaces are free of dirt, streaks, or marks and have been sanitized
 - Dispensers of soap, paper towels, and toilet paper have all been refilled
 - ...etc...

Take a Deeper Dive

If your work calls for a deeper dive into creating policy statements, articulating business rules, and empowering staff to devise clever and adaptive ways to carry out your strategy, I recommend these resources:

1. The Carver Model of [Policy Governance](#) - the clearest and best guidance I've found for formalizing the relationship between a Board and a CEO.

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2. RuleSpeak and Business Rules (from Ronald G. Ross and OMG's SBVR standard) - a rigorous treatment of how to state business rules including Policy statements. ([link1](#) and [link2](#))
3. Lewis Eisen, the author of How to Write Rules that People Want to Follow, 3rd Edition: A guide to drafting respectful policies and directives ([link](#)) (see also [new edition here](#))
4. Carpenter, Sam. Work the System: The Simple Mechanics of Making More and Working Less (4th Edition) for excellent guidance and examples for defining Policies (he calls them Guiding Principles) and Procedures (he calls them Working Procedures). ([link](#))
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