

Travelling Fewer Paths

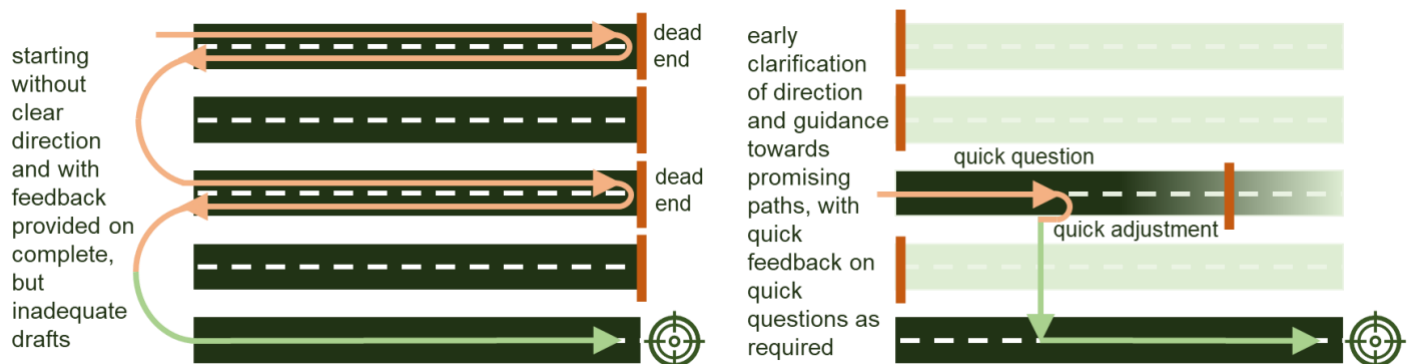
When workers are not clear about the purpose and direction of their work, it is easy to waste time, effort, and resources exploring pathways that turn out to be dead ends. Work may go a long way down the wrong path before eventually being redirected and having to start again. Being redirected a long way into a journey is discouraging, demotivating, and disempowering for workers, and reduces the productivity of everyone involved.

The cultures and work practices of many publicly funded organisations expect workers to produce relatively complete 'draft' products with little direction. Based on feedback from managers on drafts, workers revise or, in many cases, redo their work and resubmit. This process may be repeated many times before a satisfactory product is achieved.

Organisations with skilled workers can rely too much on people finding the right path without guidance, especially when information can be distributed across multiple silos. Workers may find their way in the end, but seldom via the most direct route. Enthusiastic workers with busy managers often dive in without fully understanding the issues or desired outcomes, making it less likely that first drafts will hit the mark.

When many paths are available to a worker, and little direction is provided to narrow down the options, it takes longer to produce first drafts, and is less likely that those drafts will be acceptable. The need for managers to review multiple complete, although inadequate, drafts tends to further slow feedback loops and delay finished products. The longer people spend drafting and redrafting, the more resources are consumed, the more other work is displaced, and the more likely it is that the problem will change and need a different solution by the time the work is completed.

Managing ambiguity and redoing work multiple times is demoralising and demotivating for workers. When guidance is primarily via redirection, opportunities to build skills and take pride in quality work are curtailed.



Efficiency, quality, and satisfaction are all improved when workers can seek guidance and clarification early in the drafting process, testing assumptions and clarifying directions with quick questions. Establishing cultural norms that give permission for workers to 'ask it now' helps clarify purpose, rules out likely dead ends quickly, and facilitates more timely feedback from busy managers and other experts.

Asking quick questions up front rather than circulating long drafts further down the track also makes it easier to access guidance from a wider range of contributors. Casting a broader net can reduce delays caused by single-source bottlenecks and late redirection by experts. The organisation can maximise the value of its busiest people by giving smaller, more frequent direction rather than longer, less frequent redirection.

Workers who are empowered to establish context and purpose and test assumptions early tend to be more confident, more efficient, and more satisfied with their work. Short bursts of earlier and more frequent guidance reduce the time lost to waiting for feedback and exploring dead ends. Answering quick questions to sharpen focus is a better use of managers' time than reading and responding to long drafts that are unfocused, misguided, or both. Quick check-ins create opportunities to adjust before workers get too far down the wrong path and have to backtrack.

Most people working in publicly funded organisations want to maximise the value of their work. They want to get to each destination as efficiently as possible and move on to the next journey. To do that well and consistently they need direction, not just redirection.