

## Seeing red

'The men of more dazzling genius began to sneer at the red-tape minister as a mere official manager of details.' ." Edward Bulwer-Lytton in *Alice, or the Mysteries*, 1938

The fact that that quotation is 180 years old should tell you something about red tape. Call it, bureaucracy, form-filling or what you will, it all boils down to the same thing – ridiculous amounts of paperwork and procedures all seemingly designed to frustrate and delay the very purposes they're supposed to serve, wasting time and paper and driving us mad.

Civil services the world over are notorious devotees of red tape – forms, forms and yet more forms, all in triplicate, if you please but I'm convinced that Botswana has taken it to a new level. It's become an illness which bids fair to play havoc with us; this incessant, insistent, persistent form-filling. We've all experienced it whenever we butt up against a government or parastatal organisation but I realised that the bureaucratic tail was wagging the departmental dog this week when I phoned to get an appointment with the Director of one government department only to be told by her secretary to put my request in writing and type a letter formally requesting the meeting and explaining its purpose.

I had to stop myself from screaming 'you have got to be joking' over the phone. So now instead of a simple yes or no to the meeting, an entire paper trail process has been established – a process that benefits the paper manufacturers on whose paper I will write the request, the, petroleum company whose fuel my driver will use to deliver said communication, BTC for the inevitable follow-up conversations to confirm receipt of the letter in the first place and later to reiterate the initial request – "can I have a meeting".

And trust me, that's just the tip of the iceberg - I have heard far more grandiose and humbler examples, such as the offices which require multiple copies of forms yet don't possess a single sheet of carbon paper so you just have to fill in the details many times over by hand. That's when they have copies of the correct forms available, that is, they haven't mislaid the date stamp, there are staples in the stapler and the authorising person is actually at their post.

These piles of paperwork and streams and streams of red tape are impediments to progress and frankly bloody frustrating. The procurement system in government is a prime example. So much red tape to plough through and an insistence that to buy anything you need three quotes even when there are not three equitable suppliers available. And the tendering process is so complex and long-winded it seems to have drawn up so ensure that every potential project takes as long as possible to even get to the planning stages.

What we need are Bulwer-Lytton's men of dazzling genius to sneer at these systems and those petty little managers of details, those depressing dullards whose creativity is limited to thinking up new forms to be filled out and new ways to waste time. In order to make real progress here I advocate that we need a lot less bureaucracy and a little more adhocery, That was a term coined by US leadership expert Warren Bennis in the 1960s and explored by US futurist Alvin Toffler in the 1970s, especially with those creative men and women of dazzling genius in mind.

The adhocery represents the exciting idea of an open, flexible, creative and spontaneous business, with similar characteristics to horizontal, or flat, organisations where teams of knowledge workers work mostly under their own initiative and direction. Professional service firms such as management consultancies, design companies and ad agencies are often cited as examples of adhoceries and whilst to the outside world the lack of rules and regulations may seem like mayhem it in fact creates a platform for results to be achieved.

You have an idea, and you need a meeting to move it forward so you sort it with a simple phone call, not a delaying paper process. You need hardware, software, manufacturing equipment or plant machinery to carry it out so you source the best that's available, not merely the cheapest. You need agreement and authorisation but with clear levels of autonomy it doesn't have to wait till the next quarterly Board meeting to get the go-ahead. I'm not advocating a free-for-all here – merely the shortest means to the end which is the production of goods or the provision of services by the shortest, most efficient and most creative means possible. No wasting of trees, of time, of fossil fuels, no needless deployment of ancillary staff members, no pointless delaying tactics – just the simple taking care of business.

The term 'red tape' refers to the red ribbons which have bound legal briefs for centuries and into every life some form-filling must come. But surely the emphasis should be on the word 'brief' for that is its etymological root? Short and to the point, yet still containing all the salient facts. Let's save the earth's trees by keeping red tape to such a minimum that in our brave new adhocery we can re-name it 'green tape' – far more appropriate when you consider that the colour red in most societies says stop but universally it's green that means go.

