

<https://govleaders.org/completed-staff-work.htm>

The Doctrine of Completed Staff Work

The following memorandum has been reproduced countless times by military and civilian organizations since World War II and has become a widely accepted definition of what effective staff members do. The original memorandum was drafted for the Provost Marshal General, U.S. Army, by Colonel Archer J. Lerch, Deputy Provost General. It was published in the January 29, 1942 issue of the Army and Navy Journal.

COMPLETED STAFF WORK

1. The doctrine of "completed staff work" is a doctrine of this office.
2. "Completed Staff Work" is the study of a problem, and presentation of a solution, by a staff officer, in such form that all that remains to be done on the part of the head of the staff division, or the commander, is to indicate his approval or disapproval of the completed action. The words "completed action" are emphasized because the more difficult the problem is, the more the tendency is to present the problem to the chief in piece-meal fashion. It is your duty as a staff officer to work out the details. You should not consult your chief in the determination of those details, no matter how perplexing they may be. You may and should consult other staff officers. The product, whether it involves the pronouncement of a new policy or effects an established one, should, when presented to the chief for approval or disapproval, be worked out in finished form.
3. The impulse which often comes to the inexperienced staff officer to ask the chief what to do, recurs more often when the problem is difficult. It is accompanied by a feeling of mental frustration. It is so easy to ask the chief what to do, and it appears so easy for him to answer. Resist that impulse. You will succumb to it only if you do not know your job. It is your job to advise your chief what he ought to do, not to ask him what you ought to do. He needs answers, not questions. Your job is to study, write, restudy and rewrite until you have evolved a single proposed action – the best one of all you have considered. Your chief merely approves or disapproves.

4. Do not worry your chief with long explanations and memoranda. Writing a memorandum to your chief does not constitute completed staff work, but writing a memorandum for your chief to send to someone else does. Your views should be placed before him in finished form so that he can make them his views by simply signing his name. In most instances, completed staff work results in a single document prepared for the signature of the chief, without accompanying comment. If the proper result is reached, the chief will usually recognize it at once. If he wants comment or explanation, he will ask for it.
5. The theory of completed staff work does not preclude a "rough draft" but the rough draft must not be a half-baked idea. It must be complete in every respect except that it lacks the requisite number of copies and need not be neat. But a rough draft must not be used as an excuse for shifting to the chief the burden of formulating the action.
6. The "completed staff work" theory may result in more work for the staff officer, but it results in more freedom for the chief. This is as it should be. Further, it accomplishes two things:
 - o a. The chief is protected from half-baked ideas, voluminous memoranda, and immature oral presentments.
 - o b. The staff officer who has a real idea to sell is enabled more readily to find a market.
7. When you have finished your "completed staff work" the final test is this:
 - o If you were the chief would you be willing to sign the paper you have prepared, and stake your professional reputation on its being right?
 - o If the answer is in the negative, take it back and work it over, because it is not yet "completed staff work."

<https://newrelic.com/blog/nerd-life/engineering-management-completed-staff-work>

Completed Staff Work: The Secret Management Technique to Empower Your Team

Jul 27, 2016 • 11 min read



When I was introduced to the concept of **Completed Staff Work**, I felt like I had been handed a secret management technique. I had been a manager for several years and never heard of it, so it felt like a big secret when I did. And the idea simply exploded how I thought of my work as an engineering manager.

So, let me share with you one of the most powerful management concepts I've encountered: **Completed Staff Work**. A standard for determining whether or not you've done enough work on a problem, the concept of Completed Staff Work involves useful techniques to

- Assume more autonomy for your team
- Prevent going back and forth endlessly on topics, and
- Carve out greater responsibilities for yourself.

An example of typical staff work

New Relic has a couple of engineers located in a coworking space in a city in Europe. They were unhappy with the location—it had no windows, and they said it felt too tight. I talked about the issue with our facilities person, and he quickly located another location for us. But to make it happen he needed email approval from my manager.

I composed an email to my manager that read something like this:

We've located a larger location. Their current office is cramped and has no window. The new office has a window, and enough room to fit 3 or 4 desks. The team looked at it and said it was perfect for their needs.

If you approve, reply to this email with approval for the additional monthly expenditure of \$X a month.

That seems pretty straightforward, right? But it's worth thinking for a moment about what is incomplete about this work—why this is *incomplete staff work*.

Incomplete Staff Work

My work was not complete, because my manager still had questions:

- We have another office in that area. What would the impact be of merging the two offices?
- What is our company policy for coworking spaces? Do we have some standards, so that we're not treating some locations poorly and others better?
- Will we need more room to grow in this office? What are our future plans there?
- How does this space compare to other coworking spaces we're using? How much space do they have now, and what would help them to do their best work?

What typically happens with Incomplete Staff Work is the *Great Going Back and Forth*: Lots of questions flying around, lots of time spent figuring things out. If there are multiple levels of approval, Incomplete Staff Work can be incredibly tiresome.

A couple of takeaways:

- That back and forth may indicate that I haven't thought about things completely enough. Usually, the problem is that I haven't considered the bigger picture: how a particular change would affect the rest of the company.
- The other problem is that I hadn't really dug into the important details. When I asked the facilities person how much space they recommended, it came to light that the engineers had half that recommendation per person. That provided a compelling argument for improving their location.

What is Completed Staff Work?

Completed Staff Work is when you present your plan to a decision-maker, and they can just give it a thumbs up to approve it. If they say, "sounds great, do it!" then it's Completed Staff Work.

One way of thinking about Completed Staff Work is this: Are you providing your best recommendation? Is it something you would stake your professional reputation on? If it isn't, then it's not Completed Staff Work.

Completed Staff Work flattens hierarchy

As humans, we are used to asking our boss to make the decisions. Many organizations actually discourage people from providing plans and decisions for ratification, because it's acting more like an equal to your manager, and organizations typically, if unconsciously, like to reinforce hierarchy.

In this case, once I noticed that my manager had a lot of questions, I put together a more complete plan with a lot more context. This required me to ask more questions of our facilities person and do more legwork. I thought about the questions my manager might have, which helped me think about the problem more holistically.

Doing this deeper work made me feel like I owned the solution more deeply. There was a switch in my relationship with my manager. Instead of me asking him for approval, I was making a recommendation that had everything he needed to know it was a good choice. I knew it was Completed Staff Work after I had done that extra work because I knew it was a good decision—one that I would stake my reputation on. But it was proven to be Completed Staff Work when he not only gave it a thumbs up, but passed it to his manager for approval, and his manager approved it without comment. Complete!

It's much more useful to bring your intention and best thinking to the conversation, rather than relying on your manager to decide whether something is a good idea or not. This inverts the way you relate to your manager—and to me, that's the real power of Completed Staff Work.

Completed Staff Work is a structure to empower teams

Completed Staff Work became prominent in the U.S. Army in the 1940s. Although derived from a hierarchical, written process, the principles are broadly useful and can be adapted to many situations.

Completed Staff Work empowers teams to have more local autonomy. Instead of relying on the manager to decide on the best course of action, the team members are bringing their best solutions to the manager. The manager may provide clarification or guidance when they're missing something, but over time the team will develop a habit of solving problems in a more organizationally aware way. This leads to them needing less meddling from above, and having more local decision-making.

Completed Staff Work can be quite simple

The simplest form of Completed Staff Work is simply stating an intended course of action in the form of "I intend to do X." That establishes and takes ownership of the course of action you intend to follow. If the decision-maker has questions about that course of action, they can ask.

But many problems are more complicated. For example, you can't create a huge shift in the company's strategy merely by saying, "I intend to do X," because so many people may need to get on board with the new strategy. That's when it can make more sense to write it down, and have many conversations to get people aligned on it. Both approaches are a type of Completed Staff Work.

Completed Staff Work can be iterative



Sometimes people interpret Completed Staff Work to mean that you shouldn't show work that is in progress, revealing it only when you've perfected it. But the goal of Completed Staff Work isn't to do everything as one chunk, or to produce a work artifact. The goal is to do the work in a way that has been thought about deeply enough that your stakeholders should be able to accept your recommendation, and know that it is a good decision.

It's often a good idea to talk with your decision-makers as you're putting together your plan. Ask them what a good plan will look like, and run the outline by them. If you need their help, ask. That's what they're there for.

To make Completed Staff Work more iterative, I've found it useful to approach it as a set of smaller pieces of staff work. Let's say our team's section of the website is performing worse each week. Here's what I might say to my manager:

- "The performance on the site has been getting worse and worse, and I intend to put together a plan to address it. Sound good?" This can be a good time to talk about the parameters of the work you're doing.
- If the problem is simple, I can stop there. But for more complex problems, I may need them to agree with the outline of the plan, and then go actually do the work of putting together the full plan. I may have to talk to a lot of people to figure out the best thing to do. And if the problem is really difficult, I can give my best approximation of a plan, and ask for help completing it.
- After having those conversations and doing that homework, I'll either verbally tell my manager the plan and make sure they agree with it, or show them a written version: "Our plan to address the recent site performance issues is to set up a dashboard in our office area, and to set up the New Relic performance alert email to go to the whole team. We're also planning to focus on fixing three performance issues next week. Sound good?"

If you get a "looks great, go for it," then you know you've done Completed Staff Work! But you've also done it iteratively, and your manager has the chance along the way to say, "No, don't work on that, because somebody else is actually taking care of that right now."

What's better than Completed Staff Work?

When I started as a manager, my colleagues recommended a book called *Turn the Ship Around: A True Story of Turning Followers Into Leaders*. It tells the story of the **USS Santa Fe**, a submarine with one of the poorest performing crews in the fleet. **Captain David Marquet** switched the ship's culture from the leader telling people what to do, to individuals sharing their thinking and making decisions themselves.

Marquet points the way to something even better than Completed Staff Work. He does this by describing a progression in how people talk, from being a follower to being a leader:

- Tell me what to do
- I think...
- **I recommend...**
- **I request permission to...**
- **I intend to...**
- I've done...
- I've been doing...

Completed Staff Work is a structure to get people to the "I recommend," "I request permission to," or "I intend to" phases. But you don't have to stop there. If your team members are doing Completed Staff Work, you should consider whether they should have to ask you to "thumbs up" it at all.

Pushing responsibilities farther down the spectrum leads to better results, as long as the people involved have the skills and support to succeed. One way to evaluate whether they are ready is to monitor how they're doing with their existing staff work. If their work typically just requires a "sounds great," consider giving them more authority to make those decisions without you.

On the other hand, situations in which you aren't able to give the go-ahead represent a coaching opportunity. What did they miss and why did they miss it? Did they lack a key skill or background? Do they need more support or time to think about the problem? Did you give them the right context to be successful? It's a great opportunity for learning.

I hope you find Completed Staff Work as useful as I have. I welcome your feedback: [@JadeRubick](#) on Twitter.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Completed_staff_work

Completed staff work

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

[Jump to navigation](#)[Jump to search](#)

Completed staff work is a principle of [management](#) which states that subordinates are responsible for submitting written recommendations to superiors in such a manner that the superior need do nothing further in the process than review the submitted document and indicate approval or disapproval.

In Completed Staff Work, the subordinate is responsible for identifying the problem or issue requiring decision by some higher authority. In written form such as a memorandum, the subordinate documents the research done, the facts gathered, and analysis made of alternative courses of action. The memo concludes with a specific recommendation for action by the superior.

The earliest description of the concept of Completed Staff Work appears in [U.S. Army](#) publications,^[1] although some sources indicate its origin to be a decade earlier from the [Canadian Army](#). Since its early military origin, it has subsequently found favor in police management texts in the U.S.^[2]

James Webb, Director of the Bureau of the Budget (1946-1949), attributes the Doctrine of Completed Staff Work to President Harry S. Truman.^[3] However, a memo written and circulated by Briagadier General George A. Rehm, executive officer for the G-3, Operations section, attributes the policy to [General MacArthur](#)'s headquarters in the [Southwest Pacific Areas](#) during [World War II](#).^[4]

References[[edit](#)]

- [↑] U.S. Army (January 1953) *Army Information Digest*
- [↑] Municipal police administration by Institute for Training in Municipal Administration, 1961, Institute for Training in Municipal Administration, p.80-83
- [↑] *Hecló, Hugh (Feb 20, 1980). "Oral History Interview with the Truman White House, with James E. Webb [at 62]". Harry S. Truman Library & Museum.*
- [↑] George A. Rehm (28 September 2009). *"The Doctrine of Completed Staff Work"*.