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Taking a critical view of regulations

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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Regulations are such an ever-present feature of office life that we don't usually single them out as 'stressor-elements'. Yet there they are, steadily winching-up the pressure by adding to our daily burden, often to no profitable purpose that we can see. No doubt many of them are put there for good reasons. But there are also good reasons to take a critical view of them, questioning their validity.

For the days have passed when an executive can justify his existence by simply following the regulations. Those jobs are disappearing fast. Today's manager prefers you to question the common assumptions, not in a spirit of rebellion or protest, but for the purpose of reading the situation correctly in other words, trying to be right.

Regulations are often introduced in reaction to some sort of disaster inquest. Down goes the Titanic. In come a whole lot of entirely sensible new regulations about lifeboat drill that have been saving lives ever since. That is the positive side of the picture.

The negative side is more complex. Not only are many regulations clearly obsolete and in need of abolishing. There is a danger in simply having too many regulations on the books.

To administer all of them may sometimes need a whole department of semi-clerical staff, who come to regard regulations as their bread-and-butter and are motivated to preserve them, or even create more of them if possible. That is getting rather a long way from lifeboat drill.

Aside from this, there is a further danger that too many regulations threaten the pro-active role of the executive, reducing him to a sort of custodian of the rule-book. This could hardly be more serious in terms of stifling decision-making initiative.

On that point, it is worth looking at the obvious parallel situation with traffic regulations, a controversial topic in Dubai, a young city that is hoping to avoid the expensive mistakes of its older counterparts.

Every new traffic regulation promises us a bright future of clear, safe roads where vehicles flow smoothly to their destination without any frustrating or stressful delays.

Yet congestion just keeps getting worse in one country after another except one.

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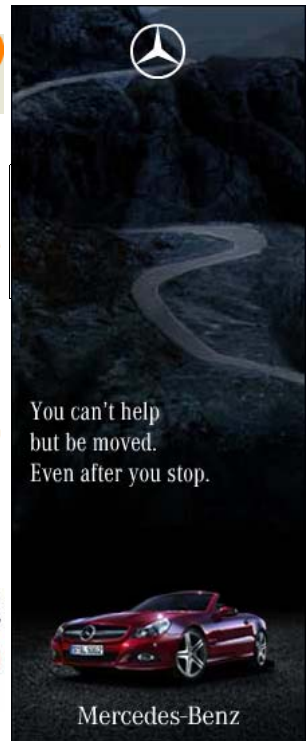
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 Mercedes-Benz

You may say it's a non-typical one: Holland, identified as particularly easy-going and receptive to experimental living.

But the findings of one Dutch traffic engineer, Hans Monderman, provide a startling lesson in the creative questioning of regulations.

Monderman not only declared that too many traffic regulations turn the driver into an automaton.

He actually dared to experiment by dismantling road-signs, uprooting traffic-lights and painting over street-markings, to see what happened. Everyone forecast gridlock and chaos.

In fact, to general astonishment, drivers re-discovered their humanity, treating other road-users with far more courtesy and consideration than before.

Interestingly, he calls it Design for Negotiation. We often talk about 'negotiating' a junction or a crossroads, but not usually in terms of 'negotiating' with other motorists. Monderman appears to have linked the two meanings of this important word.

Just a Dutch fairy-tale? Possibly, for it is far from tested on the bigger scale. But the principle of questioning the wisdom of long-accepted regulations still holds good, and should be firmly embedded in today's executive culture.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

Key points: Invisible stress

- Regulations are a less-known 'invisible stressor-element' of working life.
- Compare office rules with traffic regulations often counter-productive.
- A creative questioning of regulations should be encouraged in executives.

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