

Lunch and Learn

Breaking through Bureaucracy

Briefing: breaking through bureaucracy in student opportunities

Students' unions are hives of activity and innovation, yet can have inefficient processes and systems that are outdated. This briefing offers tools to help you to evaluate your current systems and to redesign your processes if necessary.

Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines bureaucracy as 'excessively complicated administrative procedure'. In students' union opportunities we can be too bureaucratic, with overly complicated procedures. This is often characterised by lots of form-filling and other paperwork.

Your role is fundamentally about supporting students, not about doing paperwork for them. Clearly, some paperwork is necessary but processes can become overcomplicated and overly bureaucratic with little justification.

Students' union staff and officers often juggle large workloads and become reliant on longstanding processes that aren't the most practical. Students' unions should be innovative and flexible, not just with activities themselves but in the way that they are run. The students that work with you will learn from how you organise and act, and so should be inspired by what their union is doing. If unions are to be modern, innovative and practical, it is essential to invest some time and energy into evaluation and sometimes re-design of the systems we use.

In the NUS *Success in the Student Market* report, we identified that 40% of students' unions respondents feel that they are unable to innovate because they don't have enough time. This briefing is designed to help you to think about the processes and systems being used in your students' union and allow you to consider whether these are the best they can be. It will hopefully allow you to change some systems to make them more efficient for both the students' union, and the students themselves.

Sometimes union staff and officers are reluctant to introduce changes during the academic year, and prefer implement new systems at the start of the year. This can lead to difficulty as you are trying new processes, with students and leaders who are also new.

We encourage you to think about innovating all year round. Include your student leaders in the evaluation of current procedures and the design of new ones, tell them about any changes you're considering, and why. This should help to reduce complaints from the people affected by the changes.

In his [TEDtalk](#) on leadership, Simon Sinek explains his 'Golden Circle' which leads you to think about why you do something, how you do it, and what the result or product then looks like. It's a great way to start thinking about bureaucracy, so we've included a template 'Golden Circle' for you to use at the end of this briefing.

Principles for breaking through bureaucracy

1. Know what you want to get done – your focus should be on the end result at all times. The process is simply how you get there.
2. Priorities – what are the priorities of your department or your students' union? How about the student group or students that work with you? Everything you do should be based on your priorities.
3. Reduce paperwork – it may be impractical to remove *all* paperwork however you should consider all of your current forms. Check that they are the best way to collect information. Can any forms be combined? Can they be put online? Where do you store them? Do they need to be stored?
4. Cut out processes – do your processes exist just because 'they always have' or 'that's just how we do it'? Can you remove unnecessary processes or perhaps re-design them to make them more efficient. The post-it note processes tool at the end of this briefing should help with this.
5. Empower people – make it easy for your colleagues and the students you work with to understand what they need to do. Empower them to make

their own decisions and to do things themselves. This will require you to relinquish your inner control freak but will be worth it when you notice the time you have saved!

6. Be decisive – putting off decisions wastes time and can be frustrating. Design systems so that the decision making process is easy to understand and empower student leaders to make decisions on their own.
7. Information now – this is linked to being decisive, as people are often slow to decide, because they don't have the right information. So make sure that when you are collecting information you have asked the right questions. Equally important is to provide clear, simple instructions so that you don't need to repeatedly explain things. Think about the common questions you have to answer and design a webpage or document that starts to answer these questions.
8. Always action – when you have lots to do it is important to focus on your next action. It is easy to procrastinate if you are overwhelmed by size of the task so try breaking down larger projects into small and manageable action steps.

Tools

There are many different ways that you can start to overhaul your systems and get rid of some of that unnecessary paperwork.

We've designed two easy tools for you to use that will help you to do this.

- Diary – assess how your time is spent and start to evaluate your daily and weekly activities

- Post-it processes – evaluate the systems you are currently working with and start to remove unnecessary steps.

You will find both tools explained at the end of this briefing document.

Top tips!

NUS Facilities Manager, Kevin Collier spends his working day re-designing our working systems, introducing new ideas to improve our productivity, and ensuring that our office is safe. In his spare time he also runs his own business that helps businesses to organise themselves and de-clutter their facilities. We asked him to share his top five tips for breaking through bureaucracy:

- Be patient and take time to identify the issues before formulating a plan of action.
- Be flexible and open to feedback from those that will use the system(s).
- Believe in what you build! If you don't then nobody else will so be enthusiastic when trying to explain why the project is being undertaken and explain what issues it will address.
- What are the personalities of the people involved in the process or using it? Everyone is different so may need to tailor to suit individuals to get the best out of them.
- Think strategically (order for tasks to be done in, time lines, disruption caused, help required if any).

Ideas from the commercial world

The online 'marketplace', **Amazon** is excellent at providing efficient services. They even have

a team of '[Earth Kaizens](#)' who are employed to 'dive deep into every nook and cranny of a process to identify waste and design alternative solutions that are more energy efficient'.

Their 'Wrap free' service was designed after receiving complaints from customers that Amazon products arrive with multiple layers of packaging. Amazon have introduced 'wrap free' to save customers time and helps to reduce packaging waste, which is great for the environment.

Similarly, their gift wrapping service is designed to save customers time and hassle. Gifts can be ordered directly from Amazon, wrapped and labelled by them and sent directly to the gift recipient. This saves the customer time in wrapping the gift themselves and then posting it on.

When buying a drink in **Starbucks** you are asked your name, which is then written on your cup. This helps to personalise your experience in their coffee shops, but is also a way of making the Starbucks coffee serving process more efficient. This is a great example of how it's sometimes OK to *add* a stage if it makes the overall system more efficient. Starbucks were wasting time as people would forget their order or not hear properly, and the wrong drinks were being given out.

Thinking about *why* you do something is a great way to start re-designing how you do it. Google have a [philosophy](#) that underpins all of their work. It's worth having a look at this to see how to make all of your work relate back to your main purpose as an organisation. For Google, their purpose is to provide the 'perfect search' engine, whereas the purpose of your union will be supporting students, championing students and providing an excellent student experience. This should guide you in all that you do, so if you're thinking about the process

you have for providing grant funding to student groups, for example, this should be designed in a way that makes it easy and clear for students.

Further information

This briefing was created following a Student Opportunities Lunch & Learn webinar that took place on 19th November 2013. The slides from this webinar are available on the Student Opportunities pages on NUS Connect.

Further reading

David Allen's book [Getting things done](#) is useful for anyone thinking about productivity.

Amazon [gift wrapping](#)

Amazon ['wrap free'](#)

Google's [philosophy](#)

NUS [Success in the Student Market](#) report

Starbucks [names on cups](#) – how they saved time by adding an extra step to their coffee-making process.

TEDtalks: [Simon Sinek](#): 'how great leaders inspire action'.

Think Productive [blog](#) – includes lots of advice on being a 'Productivity Ninja'.

Think Productive (Graham Allcott), [How to be a Productivity Ninja](#) – explains the Think Productive ideas and how you implement these.

Zen habits, ['10 Steps to take action and eliminate bureaucracy'](#)

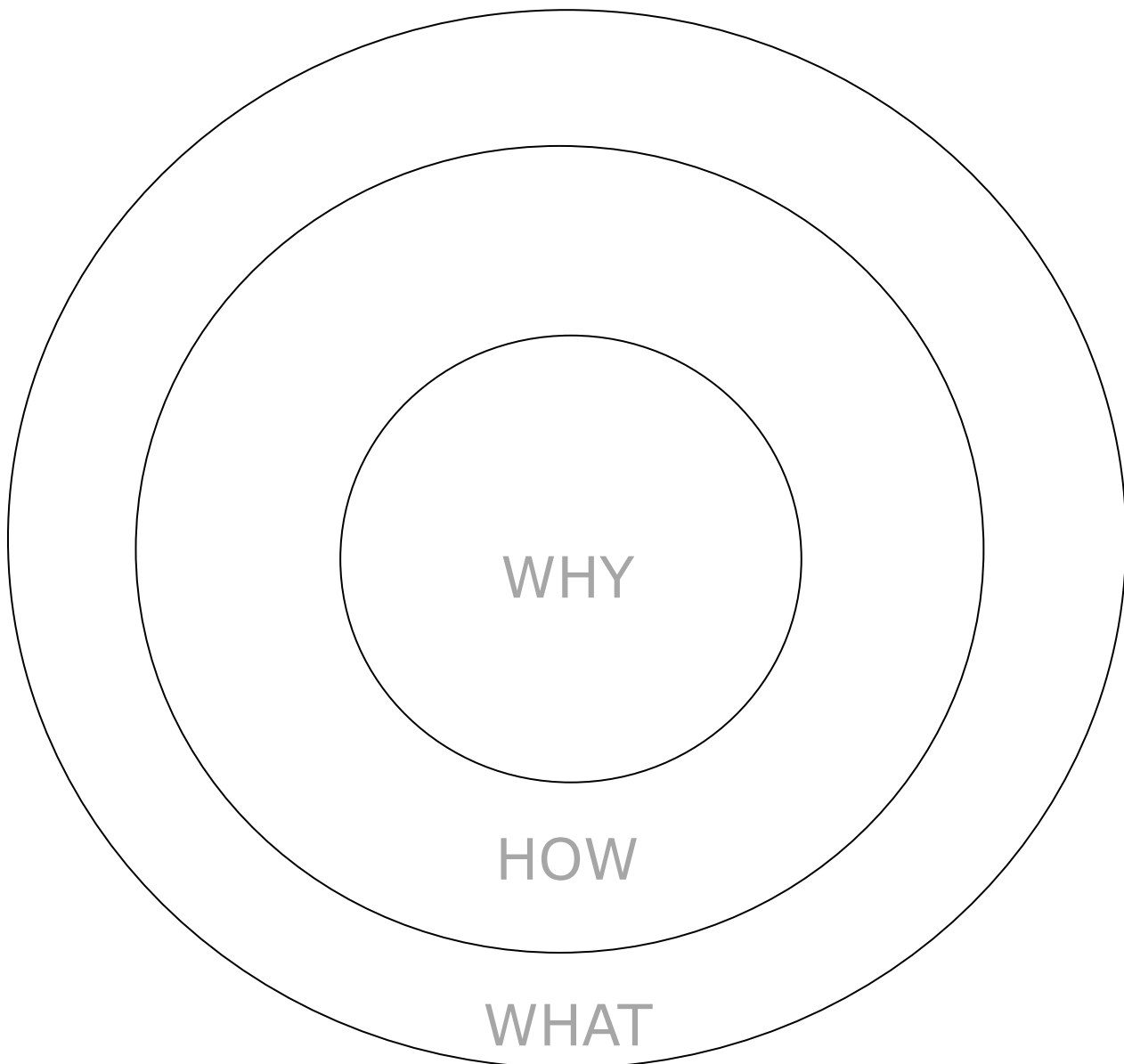


Simon Sinek's 'Golden Circle'

In his [TEDtalk](#) on leadership, Simon Sinek explains the 'Golden Circle'. He explains about why it's important to consider *why* you do something, *how* you do it and then *what* the product/conclusion is.

Watch the video and start thinking about how this relates to your work in a students' union. (If you don't have time to watch the entire video, tune in from 1:30-5:00 as this is where he explains the 'Golden Circle'.

One by one, consider the processes currently in place in your students' union and map them out onto this template.



Diary: how do you spend your time?

You probably already have a varied diary with your plans for the different types of activity that will happen each day. This exercise will help you to identify actually what you DID in a typical day.

Using space in your existing diary, or a new record if necessary, write a brief note about whatever activity you've actually been doing over each hour of each day. Don't spend ages writing down everything, just write enough for you to use as a memory jogger.

Keep this extended log for two or three weeks, then review it with your diaries and spend time justifying *why* you did each activity. It may be useful to ask a friend or colleague to work with you for this part. Ask them to challenge your justifications and question your activities. If you can't justify it then it's probably worth considering whether you can transform this part of your work.

Consider:

- How you spend your time during an average week. Are you doing your regular activities at the right time? What takes up the most time? Is that what you should be doing?
- Identify patterns in your working week – for example, you may always do your emails from 9-10am and always have lunch 1-2.
- Are you the right person for these activities? Could someone else be doing them? This isn't about delegating *all* of your work, but there may be activities that could be performed by a student staff assistant, a colleague, or perhaps the students themselves should be doing it.

When you've analysed your work diaries, think about how you can amend working processes to make them more efficient.

For example, it is common (and natural) to start the day with your email. You read through and act on the emails that are in your IN-box. But, think about it! Who is actually deciding how you spend your valuable time? Not you! It's the people who wrote those emails who have decided what you are going to do! Consider – why not start the day working on a 'Do-list' that you wrote for yourself at the end of yesterday. Now, you are in charge! Reading and responding to emails could move to a mid-morning activity after you've worked on the most urgent issues that you identified yesterday.

Another good question to ask yourself about email is, "Who do I respond to first?" It feels right and fair to start with the old mails. These are the ones that you've been pushing aside for a few days. Maybe they are a bit harder than most, maybe the response needs to be longer, or needs more information to be properly answered. However, the people who wrote these mails have already waited for a response. They know their questions are difficult, or that they are asking you to do more work. Think about doing it a different way – answer TODAY'S NEW emails first! Give those lucky people a really fast response, and knock their socks off with how on the ball you are. Then, look at what's left – pick a hard one, and get to work on it. Once you've done that, if you have more email time left, do another old one. But, if you have other priorities, get onto those, and do another B-list email tomorrow.



We've created a template for you here, but you may wish to create your own. You can photocopy this log so that you have enough copies for 2/3 weeks.

	9-10	10-11	11-12	12-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	NOTES
MON									
TUES									
WEDS									
THURS									
FRI									



Post-it note processes

Graham Allcott, author of the book, 'How to be a Productivity Ninja', and owner of the organisation *Think Productive*, shared his idea for transforming your processes.

What you will need:

- Post-it notes
 - Pens
 - Piece of large paper/clear wall
 - Your brain!
1. Think of one of the processes currently in place in your students' union
 2. Write out each stage of the process, being as detailed as possible, onto a post-it note. One post-it per stage.
 3. Examine each stage and justify why it is there
 4. Try to remove stages and consider what would happen – are there any that are unnecessary
 5. Evaluate each stage of the process, trying to make it simpler
 6. Consider the order of the process – is it effective?

This exercise should help you to identify parts of your systems and processes that are either inefficient or even unnecessary.

It may be useful when you start to draw out or list *all* of the processes or systems that you currently have so that you can identify how many may need amending.

To do this exercise properly you really do need to take the time to think about each stage. If you have many processes in place this may take some time, so do this systematically and don't try to revolutionise all of your processes in one go!



Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
t 0845 5210 262
f 020 7380 0794
e nusuk@nus.org.uk
www.nus.org.uk

nus
national union of **students**