Is your work time taken up by mandatory tasks that have no discernable value? (Consider the iconic “TPS report,” from the cult film Office Space, an ostensibly useless administrative report whose form is far more important to the boss than its content.) Or does your boss ask you to do things that fall outside of the bounds of professional expectations for your role? Barbara, an investment analyst, recalls the insult and awkwardness of being asked to serve coffee to a group of bankers right before
presenting the analysis supporting a corporate acquisition. When you’re forced to spend time and energy on tasks that neither create value nor make use of the skills for which you were hired, you have less of these precious resources to devote to your most valuable work. Worse yet, meaningless or inappropriate tasks constitute an assault on your dignity – by breaching the core requirements of your job, they convey disrespect and violate your sense of self.

Occupational stress researchers use the phrase “illegitimate tasks” to describe these needless or inappropriate tasks. Science has caught up with what employees have known for a long time: Illegitimate work wears you down. Research shows that illegitimate tasks can produce a host of deleterious effects on employee health and well-being, including increased burnout, work-family conflict, work-related depression, and levels of the stress hormone cortisol, as well as reduced subjective well-being, sleep quality, job satisfaction, and self-esteem. Illegitimate tasks make work miserable.

Research has shown that illegitimate tasks proliferate in organizations where work groups must compete against each other for resources, where resource allocation processes are arbitrary and unfair, and where the decision-making structure is unclear or incoherent. For instance, they are likely to arise in organizations where decisions are made by executives at a removed hierarchical level without understanding their impact or providing adequate resources for implementation.

Sometimes illegitimate tasks crop up out of ignorance, such as when a boss requests a report be prepared without realizing that the information has recently been compiled elsewhere, or that the report as requested would be of no use. Or they may result from a superior’s psychological makeup, such as a high need for control or a desire to appear productive. Other times, illegitimate tasks are assigned for more nefarious reasons, such as when a boss assigns a demeaning or time-consuming and needless task as a display of power or in order to humiliate a subordinate.

All this is not to deny that there are some employees who tend to complain about work systematically and balk at doing tasks they don’t enjoy. That could be the case if you have one employee on a team who objects to tasks that others complete willingly. Or perhaps that particular employee didn’t understand the requirements of the job or turned out to be a poor fit. When perceptions of task illegitimacy are shared, however, it suggests a more serious problem, one that is likely causing damage to the employees and the organization.
In addition to the risks to employee well-being, companies have other important reasons to eliminate illegitimate tasks. These tasks breach the implicit contract between employee and employer that covers, among other things, what each party expects from the other beyond what’s spelled out in the legal employment contract. As with other so-called psychological contract breaches, illegitimate tasks are linked to feelings of resentment and behaviors intended to harm the organization or other employees, such as stealing company property or spreading rumors.

Since illegitimate tasks often arise because of how work is organized, that’s a good place to start eliminating it or to keep it from occurring at all. Here are some strategies to try with your employees:

**Audit your team’s tasks and assess their value.** Work with the team to audit the tasks that members currently or periodically perform. Ask team members to estimate how much time they spend on each task, how central the task is to their role, and how much value each task yields. Also ask members whether anyone performs tasks that undermine their ability to perform well or to contribute to the team.

**Work together with your team to reduce or eliminate illegitimate tasks.** For those tasks that are needless, low in value, or seen as inappropriate, solicit your team’s suggestions for how to reduce or eliminate them, and work with members to implement solutions. Often, improving communication and granting greater autonomy can help to reduce inefficient processes.

**Advocate for your team.** Shield your team and push back against organizational conditions that promote illegitimate tasks, including unclear information and unfair procedures for allocating resources. Insist on better information when your team receives unclear or conflicting directives from above. Advocate for the resources your team needs to perform and thrive.

Beyond examining and revamping how work is organized, three additional strategies can help:

**Pay attention to the psychological contract.** Be as complete and transparent as possible when describing the job to a candidate, and encourage interviewers to answer all of the candidate’s questions fully and honestly. This is what’s known as a realistic job preview, and it helps to ensure that people who join your company know what to expect. Beyond the formal provisions of the job contract, employers should consider putting in writing “what we expect from the employee” and...
“what employees can expect from us as a company in return,” and invite employees to articulate their thoughts on “what I expect from my employer” and “what I am willing to provide.” Since the psychological contract is a dynamic phenomenon, this conversation should be revisited periodically to assess how well the contract is being upheld by both parties and whether modifications are desired.

**Reflect on your own managerial behavior and solicit feedback.** Periodically ask your team members for examples of what you do that helps them perform and what you do that makes it harder for them to perform. Try to increase the supportive behaviors and decrease the ones that hinder performance.

**Mitigate any illegitimate work that remains.** Research shows that perceptions of having illegitimate work to do are fairly pervasive; they may not be possible to eliminate entirely. If you can identify meaningful outcomes associated with seemingly illegitimate tasks, highlight them for your team. Acknowledging the pain of having to complete administrative reports or other tasks that can seem needless and approaching them with a sense of humor can also go a long way toward easing your team’s frustration.

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As a manager, I found that the solution is 1.) to understand what type of work motivates them and 2.) to have a feedback loop in place where employees feel comfortable telling you that they'd like to tackle larger projects.

I use Friday Feedback (google it) to find this out.