The
Ministry of
COMMON SENSE

HOW TO ELIMINATE
BUREAUCRATIC RED TAPE, BAD EXCUSES,
AND CORPORATE BULLSH

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INTRODUCTION

- ➤ Have you ever gotten locked out of your computer while you're at work? The good news, according to IT, is that support is available on their website — which you have no way to access since, well, you're locked out of your computer.
- ➤ Getting cc'd means you're part of the conversation, no one would think of leaving you out, and the team assumes you care about the solution to the problem you're being cc'd on. But at last count, there are 158 emails in this thread, and you'd pay serious money to stop people from cc'ing you.
- ➤ You've submitted your travel itinerary to your department head but haven't heard back from her. Unfortunately, IT is set up in such a way that the travel form resets after twenty-four hours, which means you will have to fill out and submit your travel itinerary all over again.

➤ A nationwide chain is one of the best-known big-box retailers in the U.S., selling everything from washers and dryers to outdoor hammocks. So why does the company also have an internal policy requiring them to stock snow-removal equipment in their 100+ Florida locations, even though the last time it snowed in Florida was 1977?

TODAY, IT'S SAFE TO SAY we all confront one example after another that attests to the extreme want of common sense in our world. I certainly do. As a global consultant, I am ostensibly hired by organizations to create or fix brands. But nine times out of ten, I find myself serving as an organizational change agent, bringing to light and resolving corporate blindness and miscommunication, terrible customer service, products that make no sense or don't even work, packaging that sends us into a rage, and a general lack of intuitiveness both off- and online. I can confirm that the disappearance of common sense is at epidemic levels in companies not just in the United States but everywhere.

Last year when I was at the airport (I'm pretty much always at the airport), I splurged on a pair of new headphones. They were black, sound-isolating, Bluetooth-compatible, overpriced, and inconspicuous enough so that when I had them on I didn't look like a Teletubby. Collecting my receipt, I went on my way to my gate.

What I didn't know was that I'd be spending the next forty-five minutes trying and failing to extract my headphones from their package. The headphones were pinned down and held securely in place by a bubble of hard plastic resembling one-half of a Valkyrie's bra. The cord was trapped inside a sepa-

rate plastic rectangle. No matter what I did and no matter what my angle of attack was, the plastic encasement simply wouldn't bend, dent, or move.

I tried wrenching the package apart with my fingers but stopped when my fingers started to hurt. I gnawed at it with my teeth but that only ended up hurting my teeth. I started banging the package repeatedly against one side of my seat like a piñata. Nothing worked.

This was now getting ridiculous, and crazy-making, and I had a flight to catch. I rummaged in my carry-on to see if I'd brought anything sharp with me, a house key or nail clippers, to somehow stab the plastic off, but I hadn't. Finally, I asked for help. "You don't have any scissors back there, do you?" I asked the ticket agent. Sorry, she didn't. "Or a knife?" No, and I could tell she would have preferred I not talk about scissors and knives at the boarding gate.

With not much time to go before my flight left, I raced back to the little kiosk where I'd bought the headphones. "Can you please help me?" I said to the cashier. Clearly it wasn't the first time something like this had come up. Removing a box cutter from his drawer, he sawed through the plastic for about a minute and finally handed over the headphones and the cord. "Do you want to take the container with you?" he asked. "No," I said. "I don't ever want to see the container ever again."

An experience like this is in almost delirious defiance of what could ever be defined as "common sense." To recap, I spent nearly $400 on a pair of headphones. For some reason, I left my chainsaw and other forestry equipment at home. Since I bought the headphones in an airport, obviously I'd

forgotten to pack the ones I owned or, if it was an impulse purchase, which it was, I probably planned on wearing them during the flight to block out wailing babies or listen to music. But unless I'm missing something, how was I, or anyone, supposed to *open* them?

If it sounds like I've just cherry-picked an example to support the premise that the lack of common sense is pervasive or that my own experience in companies overlooks the sanity, practicality, discernment, and straightforwardness that define most global organizations, let me assure you that's wishful thinking.

Typically, a company hires me to identify the deeper purpose of a brand or to improve customer experience. I might be asked to create a new logo; redesign a website; brand a perfume, a beer, a wristwatch, or a retail environment. But in almost every case it soon becomes obvious that the *real* problem—the one responsible for lousy morale, lower-than-average productivity, frustrated customers, and an ongoing lack of innovation (despite leaders telling me how eager they are to "harness" or "unleash" new ideas across their organization, two words I've grown to hate)—is that companies have abandoned whatever common sense they once had in favor of systems and processes that a two-week-old golden retriever would find dumb. Either businesses never had much com-

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mon sense to begin with or they're not aware it's gone missing. This pervasive lack of common sense hampers the *real* business of companies — that is, serving their customers better than the competition and becoming more responsive, attentive, and attuned to their needs. Companies are so entangled in their own internally generated issues, and further beset by reams of invisible red tape inside employees' heads, that they lose sight of this core purpose — and inevitably pay the price.

It's a bigger problem than you can imagine. (Well, actually, you probably *can* imagine it.)

Two years ago, before COVID hit, I was hired by Swiss International Air Lines to reinvent the concept of economy class travel. At least that was the presenting problem. When I met with members of senior management, they clearly had certain aesthetic fixes in mind. Changing the welcome messages on the video screens, softening the glare of the reading lights, improving the snack selection. I told them that before I could even think about welcome messages, lighting, or snacks, I needed to figure out the *real* reasons why repeat passenger levels weren't as high as they once were and why the airliner ranked number eighteen in the industry for on-time arrivals. Over the next few months, I brought the cabin crew into passengers' homes so they could hear firsthand what it's like to be an airline passenger in the early twenty-first century. I convened ground staffers, pilots, and crew in one room so they could understand what their colleagues actually *did* for work. One word kept coming up to describe the experience of almost every flyer: "anxiety."

Anxiety while being in the air is only one part of it — that may be the most Arcadian part of the whole experience. There's anxiety about getting to the airport in a timely way.

There's anxiety about being in close proximity to strangers in airports, the TSA, fellow passengers, the airline crew—what if in addition to being terrorists, they're all silent carriers of COVID (or both)? Standing in line for a boarding pass, wondering if your suitcase or carry-on is oversized or over the weight limit. There's the security screening, the Transportation Security Administration guy reminding you for the one hundredth time to remove your laptop (*while* you're holding your laptop), emptying out your pockets, handing over your belt and shoes before someone asks you to wishbone your arms over your head as your belt-less pants inch farther and farther down your hips; another TSA employee scolds you for forgetting to remove the single Tic Tac that's buried in the lint of your shirt pocket. You've now cleared security, but there's more. There's anxiety about which zone or preferred category of customer gets to board the aircraft first (Jubilee Gold, Sapphire Silver, Sterling Platinum, Tequila Sunrise, or whatever), and guess what, you're in Zone 9, meaning you get to board simultaneously with the cargo, including a dead body, three angry German shepherds, and a Persian kitten named Mary Magdalene. Anxiety after the agent scans your ticket, when almost immediately you collide with a second long line waiting to advance through the aircraft doors. Anxiety as you clump past the business class passengers, wondering, *How did these turkeys end up here? They're not better than me. Where did I go wrong?* Anxiety as you try to find room for your carry-on in a tangle of arms, elbows, and mask-free passengers who've decided just to stand there in the aisle. Anxiety about your seatmates. About the takeoff. About turbulence and, of course, the plane crashing into the side of a mountain. Not to mention the possibility there's someone on-

board who's completely off their rocker, the sort of person you read about in the *Daily Mail* under the headline, Shocking Moment When Airline Passenger . . .

There's anxiety around your arrival. Will there be snow or a heat wave? How long will it take to secure an Uber or a taxi? Is it rush hour? If you checked luggage, did the airline lose it, and if it didn't, will it be the last one to thump onto the carousel? On and on it goes.

More than welcome messages, reading lights, or snacks, the biggest issue around flying for most passengers is the mix of apprehension, uncontrollability, claustrophobia, and fear that make up the thing we call "anxiety."

I'm sorry, but seriously, is this news to anyone who's ever boarded an airplane? Isn't it just common sense? A few months later, a new department in the company was up and running. Focusing on ways to minimize anxiety for the average passenger, it also kept its eye on other places in the organization where common sense was conspicuously lacking. Soon the company began doing things differently.

Today, if you're a passenger taking a Swiss International flight from, say, Zurich to JFK, forty minutes before the plane lands, the pilot comes over the loudspeaker. In addition to giving gate numbers, the pilot then tells you how long the wait times are at customs and immigration and gives you a weather report and an estimate of how long it will take to walk from the gate to the luggage area (or to immigration) and for your taxi or car service to reach the city. The airline isn't responsible for any of these things and has no control over them — but you get off the plane knowing the airline takes your time considerations, your feelings, and your anxiety levels seriously.

There was another common-sense issue the airline hadn't

picked up on. Typically when you disembark from a plane, an orange-jacketed cleaning crew is waiting in the wings to board. They storm the aircraft, flipping up the armrests, vacuuming, scrubbing and wiping down surfaces, and bagging cans, wrappers, magazines, newspapers, and anything else passengers have left behind. They then make a concerted effort to push the armrests into their default positions. Why, though? A colleague of mine timed how long it took the average passenger to maneuver past a lowered armrest to get to the middle or window seat, versus when the armrest was raised. Two or three seconds. He did the math. There are 220 to 240 seats on an airbus. The cleaning crew raised and lowered every single armrest. It was the lowering part that took up valuable time. Why not keep the armrests upright, so that it's easier for passengers to board and slide across into their seats?

In less than a year, Swiss International Air Lines has become synonymous in customers' minds with timeliness, consideration, and empathy. Revenues are up, and so is the number of returning passengers. Department divisions and services that never saw the need to communicate are now working together pretty much seamlessly, and *Business Insider* recently named it the number two airline in Europe.

Fifty percent or so of all the people on earth work for some sort of organization. A business. A government agency. A school or college. A hospital. A bank or insurance firm. A research company. A media or pharmacological conglomerate. When I ask the people in charge how many common-sense issues there are in their organizations, most squint and throw out a guess — a few here or there, maybe, but not many. In

fact, most will tell you their organizations *operate* on common sense. *Look how smoothly our office is running. The new IT system is much better than the old one (though it's already slightly outdated). We're thriving. We're* more *than thriving. If you have any doubts, check out our latest quarterly report, and you'll see how happy Wall Street is with our progress.*

But the truth, at least in my experience, is that in large organizations, the number of common-sense issues actually

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runs a lot higher; in a lot of cases, it's off the charts. The bigger the organization, the more common-sense issues there typically are. And if you take time to ask around and talk to employees, they will tell you that the IT department is a bunch of never-available nerds who find it beneath them to communicate with other departments and who have no time for anything, and you should read what customers say online about the company and its products and services, and who cares about the quarterly reports or Wall Street anyway because this company is kind of a nightmare.

They're not alone. Many of the examples you'll be reading about in this book, like the ones I gave earlier, may seem just too far-fetched to be real. But even though I have disguised individual and company names, I absolutely vouch for the fact that they do exist. So do these:

➤ At the height of the COVID pandemic, in order to reduce the possibility of transmission, a law was passed in Italy restricting the number of bathrooms that restaurants in Milan could have available to their customers. Restaurants complied, placing padlocks on all the cubicles except one. But what about diners who were waiting for their turn to use the bathroom? You guessed it: they had to line up to access the lone stall in the restaurants' narrow — and, nine times out of ten, packed — hallways.

I'm reminded of a flight I took from Zurich to Frankfurt around that same time period. Mindful of contagion, the Swiss regulatory authorities required all 180 passengers to fill out a form detailing our city of origin, where we were going, and even our seatmates' names, in case we, or they, later came down with a hacking cough, body aches, and fever. All 180 of us obliged, the problem being that the airline had only two pens, which for the next twenty minutes were passed up, down, and across aisles, from passenger to passenger, germy hand to germy hand.

The airline was meticulous about the disembarking process. One by one, by row letter — 1C, 2C, 3C — passengers rose, tightened their masks, collected their things, and exited the plane. Hand sanitizer was available for anyone who wanted it, and everyone kept a distance of six feet between them. At which point we were all herded like cows into a shuttle bus to take us to the terminal. Needless to say, the bus was elbow-to-elbow, facemask-to-facemask jammed.

➤ A company launched a new program designed to

"simplify" its various projects. The problem was that the company used literally thousands of acronyms—*Has the GLC come in yet, Drew, and does it confirm our SSNR? Is it RDF-compliant?* There were so many acronyms, employees couldn't keep them all straight. To help resolve the problem, the company self-published its own *Internal Acronym Dictionary* (or *IAD*). Aside from being incredibly boring to read, the *IAD* meant that whenever employees used an expression like "consumer packaged goods" (instead of CPG), they were scolded and told to look up the shorthand version. Looking up expressions and finding their matching acronyms soon became corporate law, or CL, as the company probably calls it.

➤ During a meeting, a vendor that sells equipment and parts to Home Depot was told there was too much swearing on the sales floor. When an employee pointed out that profanity was fairly common throughout the industry and that a lot of customers swore too, HR issued a company-wide memo: "swearing must now be confined to conversations between employees and customers."

➤ Where did it all go? In the first few weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, toilet paper was as hard to come by as a Manhattan parking space. While people across the globe prepared for an indeterminate lockdown, photos and videos of naked toilet paper shelves in big-box stores appeared almost daily across social media, which incited even more hoarding and panic-buying. Even Amazon found itself months behind on orders. Isn't it simply common sense for stores and their supply chains to factor in extreme events and keep enough toilet paper on hand, as the makers of other popular pandemic items—liquor,

sex toys, greeting cards, weapons, coloring books, jigsaw puzzles, and Neflix subscriptions — discovered?

For those who found toilet paper only to lose their jobs, getting unemployment benefits proved to be even harder than landing work. All across the United States, employment checks arrived late, and sometimes not at all. When you called to find out where your check was, hoping an actual person could explain why your application was being held up, or why your entire account was locked, you were usually rewarded halfway through your multi-hour wait by the electronic system abruptly hanging up on you.

Whether we're masked or unmasked, attending meetings in person or via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, in the midst of a pandemic or in the aftermath of one, as you will see the absence of common sense shows up wherever humans beings come together. More than anything, I hope that the pages ahead reveal that the frustrations, constraints, headaches, tangles, and handcuffs you face every day aren't necessarily confined to your own workplace. Take it from me that this dumb stuff happens all around the world.

In the chapters that follow, in addition to presenting even more hard-to-believe but true cases of a lack of common sense in a variety of business and customer-centric settings, I also try to provide a road map to how you set up your own Ministry of Common Sense where you work.

To me, this makes all the sense in the world. In fact, it's just *common sense.*

The Ministry of COMMON SENSE

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