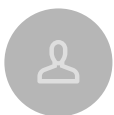Adapted from Pixabay Images

Friction Points: The Crystallization of Inefficiency

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One of the things I think about regularly are friction points – which I'll describe in a minute – and how they relate to physical security, urban planning, and, more and more often, communication, efficacy, and efficiency in the workplace. For the purposes of this article, we'll define friction points as any object, rule/regulation, or idea that either slows or stops the flow of movement towards an objective. Friction points can be fixed features, as in the case of poorly-planned, narrow sidewalks that inefficiently funnel traffic, or they can be fluid, like people inattentively walking down these same sidewalks, creating additional obstacles. As metaphysical items, they can come in the form of over-regulation, cultures of micromanagement, or outdated mental maps that influence policy, planning, and leadership.

communications to be the major offender when it comes to creating friction: the wrong people know the wrong things, systems intended to create clarity and accountability become overwhelmed, and opacity replaces transparency. Miscommunication – like every friction point – eventually calcifies: it becomes such an accepted feature of a company's culture that employees – at least the ones who want to survive long enough to get to happy hour every night – begin to create workarounds: methods and hacks of bypassing friction points, whether it's storing three copies of documents that they only need one of, setting up their own internal communications network, or finding some other method to overcome the juggernaut of inefficiency that prevents them from doing their job. If you're a leader and your people are using workarounds, it's because they've resigned themselves to inefficient systems: it's because you have failed.

Outside of the office, friction points ultimately represent a chink in society's armor: a soft spot, a threat to the actual well-being of a city and its citizenry. As the size of a city increases, so do its friction points. In Manhattan, you need only step outside to take stock of New York City's vast number of friction points. They range from gridlock in Times Square to disconnected communication in police operations to a disparity in width between avenues (north-south) and streets (east-west), particularly in Midtown. Harmless, if annoying, right? No. Not harmless at all.

So why might something like the latter be troublesome? The answer is simple: because it creates large stoppages of people in busy intersections, physically locked into/onto street corners, leaving them an incredibly soft target to events like the terrorist attack that took place on Halloween in 2017 killing 8 and injuring 15 or the attack in Times Square earlier that year by a deranged man who killed an 18-year-old tourist when he drove his car into 23 people. That the city has responded by putting up large concrete blocks – more friction points – in high traffic areas speaks less to a cohesive anti-terrorist strategy than it does to a lack of imagination: likely the result of internal frictions that prevent those tasked with securing this city from red-teaming worst-case-scenarios and preparing accordingly. That, mind you, is a single example.

Beneath the city and connecting four of the five boroughs is the subway system, whose history over the last 30 years is nothing but friction points wrought by decades of wear and tear coupled with technological obsolescence and political power struggles... all paid for by riders who tiredly move from overcrowded platforms onto overcrowded trains. There's absolutely nothing preventing an attack like the ones executed against the Tokyo Underground in 1995, as evidenced by the bombing which took place at the Port Authority/Times Square Subway station last November. In that case, three received minor injuries, but the incident illustrates the potential for total havoc, especially given that in 2016, some 5.7 million people rode the subway every day.

As I said, friction points tend to calcify over time. All one can really do is to be aware of – and prepare yourself for – them, not add to them, and seek roads less traveled when it comes to navigating your social and physical terrain and geography. You might hold

raising the awareness of one or two people... but don't count on it: you'll likely just run into more friction.

This essay was originally posted in **The Quartermaster newsletter.**

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