*PLEASE NOTE: This is a machine transcription. Some punctuation and spelling weirdness are to be expected.*

This past weekend, my husband Rik and I sat down and we reworked some of our business procedures. As your business grows, things change, right? Tools get updated. Sometimes what you used to do is no longer important, but some new thing has come along to take its place. Now I talk a lot about the importance of creating operating procedures in your business. It's kind of what my program 6 Figure Systems is all about. Systems are what make you more efficient they help you maintain consistency in your products and your services. They let you identify what's working so you can do more of it and eliminate what isn't working for you anymore.

A few weeks ago you might remember that I published an episode of this podcast called Creating Productive Workflows in Your Business and that is all about getting started with operating procedures. One of my listeners, I'm going to call him Joe since I don't have permission to use his real name here. Anyway, Joe emailed me to say that, well, he found the information really helpful he was hoping for a deeper look at the topic. He had a few specific issues, but one of them really stood out to me.

He said in his email that no one can follow even what I think are relatively simple checklists. This is episode 109 of the Tiny Course Empire Podcast, and today we're taking a deep dive into what it means to have a standard operating procedure in your business, why they might not be working for you as you'd hoped, and what you can do to make them better.

Hey, it's Cindy, and thank you for spending a few minutes of your day with me. You'll find the show notes and the recommended resources for this episode at tinycourseempire.com While you're there, be sure to download the online business Road Map. This step by step plan will show you exactly what to focus on during this phase of your business. Whether you're just starting out or you're ready to scale, make sure you hit the subscribe button to new episodes drop every Thursday morning and next week we're talking about why it is so hard to put yourself out there to grow your business.

And I'm going to have some tips to make it easier on you, but that's next week. This week is all about how you run your business and especially how you can make running that business easier and more efficient by creating good processes and procedures. Now before I dive into today's topic, I do want to give you just a little bit of background about me. You may already know that back in 2011 I quit my day job to launch a freelance business. At the time, I was the purchasing manager for a small factory where we made automotive and appliance parts.

I'd worked there for about 15 years, and I had worked my way up from Box Maker, which is about the lowest you can go all the way up to management and I was in charge of buying everything i bought all the supplies, I bought all the tools, I bought all the fasteners, all the boxes, et cetera, everything I negotiated, almost all of the contracts i coordinated shipments and I approved invoices.

But here is what you might not know about me, and it's why I'm so passionate about systems and checklists and standard operating procedures. So in addition to my role as the person who ordered everything, I was also one of three people who were tasked with maintaining our ISO certification. Iso is the International Organization for Standardization and it's their job to ensure that factories have and maintain proper standard operating procedures. It's these. So PS SOP stands for Standard Operating Procedures, and it is these SO PS that make it so that all of the parts of a car fit together like they're supposed to, or so that your new stove doesn't blow up the first time you try to use it.

I won't get into the details of how it all works, but basically if your company is ISO certified, it means that you have taken the time to establish good systems, to document your processes, and to follow those processes for every single thing you produce. It's the establishment and the documentation part that I was in charge of. Our team of three maintained about 30.000 thousand documents, and it was those documents that were the operating instructions for literally everything that happened in that factory.

They covered everything from how and where a board meeting took place to what cleaning supplies were approved for use in the bathrooms. Everything had a procedure to follow, and I learned pretty quickly that those procedures were what made everything we did more efficient and what helped us to produce better quality parts. I will admit, though, that I was often really annoyed by these procedures. Some of them got in the way of progress rather than helping us do more or better things. And I've talked to some of you who are concerned that following a checklist in your business doesn't leave any room for creativity or flexibility in your work.

And that's true if you run your business like an automotive factory but we're not making cars here. We get to have all of the benefits of good procedures without those inflexible checklists getting in the way of our fun. I think that's what my listener, Joe, is looking for. And I bet that's something that you're wanting in your business too so let's take a deep dive into standard operating procedures, how to create them and how to use them effectively in your business.

First of all, there's a lot of maybe unfamiliar terms being thrown around here, procedures and SOPS and checklists and whatnot so let's do a little defining before we go any further. Let's start at the top and kind of drill down picture pyramid or an organizational chart it's narrow at the top and it's widening out as you pass through each level and your documentation is going to be similar to this. So at the very top we have processes. This is just a standardized way of achieving a result. A process is big picture stuff so you probably have a process for building an audience, and maybe that process involves creating content and doing affiliate outreach and getting interviewed on podcasts.

Maybe you have a process for keeping your finances in order that includes things like bookkeeping and bill paying and working with your accountant. You probably have a process for developing new products or courses. Your entire business actually is made-up of different processes then contain procedures, and procedures are a defined way of creating some kind of a deliverable. So where processes are about the big picture, procedures have a start and an end point, and they're about producing something tangible.

For example, there's a procedure for launching a new course, or for publishing a YouTube video, or for writing a sales page. Then the final level is Procedures contain work instructions, and that's a term that you may not have heard before. Work instructions are all about the details. They tell you exactly which link to click and which button to push. They may have screenshots or videos for clarity, and they are very detailed. So, for example, within the new course launch procedure, you might have a work instruction for creating a slide deck. That work instruction will detail how to name the deck, where to save it, what template to use, what types of images and fonts are appropriate, and which transitions to use between slides.

All of these things are sometimes referred to as checklist people will call a procedure a checklist or a process a checklist or a work instruction A checklist. And I do this too so my apologies if I'm the one that is confusing the situation here. But these can all be called checklist. And like I said, it can get really confusing so if I ask you to create a checklist for something, or if you ask a team member to create a checklist, I don't really know how. Is this a process is it a procedure how much detail do I need to include what type of information should be on that? And I think this is what's keeping my friend Joe stuck.

He showed me one of his checklists and to be honest, there was a lot going on and it felt a bit overwhelming. So let's dive in and see how Joe and hopefully you can create more useful and usable documentation for your business. I have a really short seven step process for you to follow that's going to help. Step Number one is to ask yourself what is the scope of this process what are the boundaries? For example, are you publishing A blog post? Or is this process just about writing A blog post? This is answering this question is going to help you to know if you're writing a broader procedure or a really detailed checklist.

So if we go to that blog post example, if you're publishing A blog post, that might be a procedure it's a higher level To Do List than say editing A blog post would be or formatting A blog post those are very detailed things that would require more of a work instruction than a procedure. So the first question to ask yourself is what's the scope where are the boundaries? Is this a very detailed work instruction or is this a broader, more high level procedure instead? Question number two is who is going to use this checklist or process and what skills or knowledge do they already have? So for example, let's say you are creating a video editing checklist.

You might have items on that checklist to remind people about the proper fonts that you want used and what call outs match your brand. But you can probably assume or maybe you can assume that the person who's doing the editing actually knows how to use your video editing software. If they do, if the person who is using this checklist knows how to use that video editing software, then there is less detail required than if the person doesn't really know how to use the video editing software.

So the next the second question is who is going to use this checklist or process and what skills or knowledge do they already have because that's going to inform how detailed the checklist or the process needs to be. The third question to ask yourself is what is the desired outcome what's the deliverable? What will you have when all of the items on the checklist are completed? Will you have a published blog post will you have a scheduled email will you have a fully edited video? Defining that final deliverable is going to help you when you are writing your checklist when you're writing your procedure, it's going to help you know where to stop.

And that's really important, because otherwise your checklist can grow just out of all bounds, right you can end up with 37 items that kind of meander from 1 project to another if you don't know where those boundaries are if you don't know where the end is, if you are not really clear on what the desired outcome is on what that deliverable is. So make sure that you know what that is before you start creating your process or before you start documenting your process make sure you know exactly what the desired outcome is at the end.

Step number four is to follow the process from start to finish and write down everything that you do, or everything that your team member does, or everything that you want your team member to do. We're looking for the big steps, so for example, you're going to write down things like do keyword research, not log into ubersuggest so, big steps big picture here. At least on this first pass, Then step number five you're going to go back and you're going to identify the steps that need further details. For example, does do keyword research need more details do they need to actually log into Ubersuggest if that's the case, then you can create a secondary checklist with those details in it so don't overwhelm the big picture checklist.

We'll talk more about that in just a minute. Step number six. When you write up your checklist or your procedures in their final form, you can link related procedures and checklists together so that your team member or you can easily find what they need so back to that example from step number four. If Do keyword research is one of the steps and it links to the checklist on how to use Ubersuggest, then that makes it easy for whoever is working through this process to find the additional information that they might need and then finally, the last step is to review and revise your processes, your procedures, and your checklists continually.

So I know that was a lot. I want to walk through this again with a live example like I said, Rik and I just walked through this process just this past weekend about how to create better processes and procedures so it's fresh in my mind and I'm going to give you those live examples for each step so the first thing we did, step number one, what's the scope of the process? We had to sit down and say, OK, what is this process that we are documenting? In our case, we were documenting how the member site over at Six Figure Systems gets updated following every live event so if you are a six Figure Systems member, you will know that we run Q and A calls twice a month we have, we have mindset coaching for the VIP level that happens once a month we have live workshops, we have other member events that happen and every time those events happen Rik goes in afterwards and has to make several updates to the member site.

As the member site gets more and more complex and we have more and more things going on, more and more events happening, updating it becomes more confusing over time so what we were doing was making sure that nothing was getting missed in those updates so the scope of the project was to update the member site following a live event. So that was step one.

Step number two was to identify who was going to use these checklists or these processes. It's just Rik and I in our company so it was going to be Rik who was using these processes and procedures. Step number three was to determine what is the desired outcome, What is the tangible deliverable that you have once these processes are followed once this checklist is followed and for us it was to have all of the relevant areas of the member site showing up to date information so all of the calendars needed to be correct.

All of the sidebars needed to be correct all of the member dashboard needed to be correct the timer for the next event needed to be correct. The pop up letting people know about the next event needed to be correct there was a lot of things going on. So the desired outcome was to have all of that stuff updated. Once we knew what we were trying to accomplish, what the outcome was and what the scope of this project was. Then we could sit down and we could follow the process and the way that we did this was we sat down at the table, both of us, with our laptops and we walked through the entire process Rik walked me through every single thing that he does when we have an event, when the event is over.

And what I did is as he was working through the process, I wrote every step down on three by five note cards. You guys know I'm love 3 by 5 note cards they are so useful I buy them by the hundreds. So in this instance I took a big stack of them and for everything that he did, for every step along the way I just wrote down on a 3 by 5 card what it was he was doing and where he was doing it. Then I had this big stack of cards at the end and we sat down together and we spread them out on the table and we put them in order, in the proper order that things need to happen or that we like things to happen so we could organize them so then we had step one, Step 2, step three-step four, Step 5.

Then finally in Step 5 in our example here is to identify what checklists or what items need more details. Now in this case, because Rik knows this software so well, we didn't really need any further details and because he's the only one that's going to use these checklists, he's fine with that higher level, more of a procedural checklist he doesn't need the detailed work instructions because he does this all of the time. If we were going to hand this off to a team member, we would have had to create several more checklists so that they could actually do the things that Rik does so for example, instead of saying set up wise notify for the pop up, we couldn't have said that we couldn't have just left that there we would have had to given instructions for how to set up wise notify and we would have put that in a separate checklist.

So that was Step 5. Identify where we needed further details in our case, we didn't need any further details depending on your business, you may or may not need further details in your checklist. And then step 6 is to put those items into their final form. So remember, I have them all on three by five note cards spread out all over my dining room table. So we did two things. We took those three by five note cards and we wrote them up either in a simple checklist or we put them in a recurring project with more detailed information.

So we have two types of live events that happened for the members. The first one is AQ and a call or open office hours or mindset coaching. Those are member only events and they require a lot less on our side to update and maintain. And then the second type of event that we have is a live workshop. Those are available to the public and those require a lot more work on our part there's a lot more that goes into putting a live workshop on then AQ and a call.

So we had two different types of processes we were documenting. So for the simpler ones, for the Q and A calls, for the open office hours, for the mindset coaching, we did just a simple checklist in our project management software that Rik can follow when he is setting up the member site for these events. For the live workshop, we did something a little bit different we actually created a recurring project that then has all of the steps involved and some actual work instruction, detailed checklists involved.

So step six, we put them into put our notes into their final form in either a checklist or in our project management software. And then step 7 is to review and revise. Now Rik uses these processes, these procedures, these checklists, he uses them all the time. He has admin access obviously to our project management software where we keep them. So he will keep them updated on an ongoing basis that's really important. Regardless of where you keep your processes, where you keep your procedures, where you keep your checklist, it is to keep them really updated because if they are outdated then they become useless over time and we don't want that to happen so that final step, review and revise Rik will take care of that as he is using those checklists.

So that is my seven step process for creating better Sops in your business and I also have, before I let you go, some best practices for creating more useful and more usable checklists for your business, the first thing I want to recommend is that you keep the steps to a minimum in the Checklist Manifesto. Author Atul Gawande recommends that no more that you have no more than nine items on anyone checklist. If you have more than nine items, it should be broken down further to make it easier to use, easier to understand.

Remember question number two or step number two which is about the skills and the knowledge that the person using the checklist has. Now, if you are writing a checklist for video editing, say, and the person using the checklist doesn't have the skills to follow a really short, broad checklist as it is, then you need to either create additional, more detailed checklists and link to those, or do additional training so that person can follow a shorter checklist or both.

Which brings me to my second point and that is it is a misconception that you can just hand a new team member, or any team member for that matter, your operations manual and let them head off to do their job. You will always need to train them on the bigger picture stuff and even on some details depending on how much experience and expertise they have. Someone who's knowledgeable about your video editing software is going to be able to easily follow your editing checklist.

Someone who's new to editing is going to need more training first, so don't skip that step don't make the mistake of thinking that you can just hand them a checklist and let them go. They need more support than that.

Another tip I have for you, and this is a common mistake that I make if I'm being honest, is that no one is exempt from following your written procedures and your checklist. This is a company culture thing, and like I said, I am as guilty of this as the next person about not following my own checklist. I have every excuse in the book too. I'm too busy to go and look for it i don't need it i already know what I'm doing, or I already know it's out of date and I don't have time to update it right now.

You name it, I've said it. And none of those are good excuses for not following your own Britain processes. We lead best when we lead by example if you want your team members to respect and follow your documented systems, you have to demonstrate that they are important by using them yourself. And remember my complaint that I'm too busy to go and look for them. All of your checklists, all of your procedures, all of your processes need to be easily accessible people need to know where to find them they're not going to spend 15 or 20 minutes hunting down a checklist they're going to just do their own thing so make sure that anybody who needs access to your documentation has it, and that they know where it is.

So keep these documents in a cloud account, keep them in Google Drive, keep them in Dropbox, keep them in your project management platform, keep them in Trello, whatever, wherever you want to keep them but make sure that everyone who needs them has access to them and can find them, because otherwise they're going to be left on their own to figure things out and that means they're not following your checklist and they're not doing things the way that you want them done.

Also consider providing different formats and what I mean by this is you could use things like templates to make creating graphics or landing pages or document formatting faster. You could use a flow chart if people need to make a decision about something as a part of a process then you could consider using a flow chart. So an example of that might be if Rik were deciding which checklist to use. You could have a simple flow chart that said you know, was this AQ and a call use this. Use this checklist was this a workshop use this checklist was this a mindset coaching call then use this other checklist.

So a simple flow chart like that can help people make decisions. And another tool that you can use are worksheets to help keep track of important details. I've told the story before about working with a client who was setting up a very complex, very fast-paced 12 day sale and every day something different was on sale and it had a different coupon code and there were sales pages to keep track of and countdown timers to add and emails to schedule and it was it was all very complex. And the first thing I did when he kind of handed this to me, handed this project to me, was I sat down and I created a worksheet to help me keep track of it all so every day had a different sheet that had the name of the product and the link, and whether or not the countdown timer had been created, whether or not the email had been scheduled so I had all of this information on a single sheet, and that worksheet helped me to stay on track and not lose track of anything of any of these moving parts so consider creating different formats or different tools that you or your team can use alongside your processes and procedures to make your job easier.

Remember too that checklists and procedures are living documents. They need to be continually updated. Don't wait until they're so far out of date that you have to rewrite them from scratch. As the saying goes, a stitch in time saves 9, so keep those things updated. Spend 2 minutes updating your documents today instead of three hours doing it when the whole thing is broken and you've already lost control of the situation. You can also make it part of your team members job to keep their own documentation updated. This is a really good way to give people ownership of a process or ownership of a project. It helps them to feel more like they're a valued member of the team and it takes work off of your plate because you don't want to be the bottleneck in getting all of these things and maintaining all of these processes and procedures you do not want to be the one whose desk all of this stuff lands on.

It's just going to cause problems down the road. So make it a part of your team member's job to keep their own documentation updated, but do make sure that there is only one true copy. This is why I like systems like Google Docs or a project management software for this. If you're using Microsoft Word and it's stored in Dropbox, then you can run into problems with conflicting copies or maybe somebody will download a copy to their desktop and they're going to use this copy and they know right where it is they use it all the time and they open it up every time that they have to schedule your blog post or edit your video or whatever it is.

But unbeknownst to them, three months ago you updated the process and the new version is sitting in Dropbox somewhere but they're using the one that they have on their computer because they downloaded it and it's just easier for them so keeping your procedures, your processes, your checklists all in a cloud account somewhere can help eliminate that so always make sure that there is only one true copy and that everyone who needs that is using that one true copy. I have three other resources for you if you want to dig into this more if you want to do more with your own processes and procedures, three really good resources for you to check out number one, The Checklist Manifesto by Atul Gawande.

In this book, he explains how checklists create immediate improvements in business and he has created this. He calls it a checklist revolution into fields that are include things like medicine and disaster response and investment banking and construction and all kinds of businesses it's a really fascinating read i highly recommend you check it out. Another really good book to read on this is Work the System by Sam Carpenter. The purpose of this book, according to the author, is to help owners of small to medium sized businesses break loose to eliminate organizational inefficiency so growth can happen, so profits can increase and so they can find true personal freedom, which is what I talk about all the time in my platform in my program, 6 Figure systems that is what we are all about is doing things in the most efficient, most effective, most profitable way so that you can enjoy the business that you are building and the life that you are creating as a result of that business.

If you'd like to join us in Six-Figure Systems, you will find us at sixfiguresystems.com and I hope to see you on the inside.

So let me ask you this, Do you have and do you use good documentation for your business processes? Why are I not? Drop me a comment over at tinycourseempire.com and let me know what's holding you back i would love to help you get unstuck. That's it for me this week i will be back next week with some straight talk about stepping out of your comfort zone and being seen as the expert you are. Have a terrific rest of your day and I will talk to you again next week.