Too many cooks

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It started out as a simple design idea. I was designing a receiver for a TDM (time-division-multiplexed) data stream. The format was several blocks of 4 data bits each and then one block containing 5 bits, one of which was for synchronization. This pattern then repeated. My boss recommended a modified Johnson counter to handle the offset count. It worked perfectly.

After testing, I asked my boss whether he'd mind if I tried to publish it. He stared at me silently for so long that I thought he'd fallen asleep with his eyes open. Then he grinned. "OK" was his only reply.

Later that day, I handed him a three-quarter-page description plus a schematic and a timing diagram. He nodded, and said, "George has to sign off on it." George was my supervisor's boss.

George said he liked it. "But it needs some revising. Your description of the timing isn't clear," he added. "I sort of understood it. I don't think the readers will."

The other guys in the office got it, I thought. Who do you think reads the magazine? However, knowing my place in the food chain, I said, "What do you suggest?"

After 10 rewrites, which included almost a dozen "suggestions" and two face-to-face discussions, my simple article had grown to three pages of description with two added diagrams. George OK'd it, adding, "Now, all it needs is Ralph's signature." Ralph was George's boss.

I put it in Ralph's inbox, with a note. Ralph had a technical background, but he was primarily an administrator. He shouldn't do much more than look it over and sign off on it, right?

When I saw it again, red lines ran through half of my rewritten sentences, a red circle enclosed one diagram, and question marks and notes filled the margins. My supervisor stopped by my cubicle a couple of times and watched me rewriting and rewriting at my desk during lunch. Each time he left, he was grinning and shaking his head.

A month later, my article now two pages longer, Ralph OK'd my rewrite. "Now, have Security review it," he said, handing it back to me. "Can't I—skip them?" I asked. Ralph shook his head. Reluctantly, I stuffed the papers into an envelope and sent it. A month and a half later, I received a phone call. "Mr Lubs?" said the voice on the line.

"Yes?"

"I'm Hopkins, from Security. You wanted us to review an article you want to publish? About a Smith counter?"

My heart sank. "Yeah. Uh … it's a Johnson counter."

"Oh? Yes, I see." The voice paused. "The article is acceptable. Good luck publishing it."

"I … I … I … thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you," I said to the dial tone. I lost no time in sending the article to *EDN*. The editor sent me a draft to review before printing. When I saw it, I almost cried: It had been revised down to one page, a schematic, and a timing diagram. It looked very much like my original work. I wrote "Looks good" on it, sent it back, and saw it in print about three months later.

I've heard somewhere, "Too many cooks spoil the broth." What do you say when they aren't cooks, but they insist the broth needs fixing? I say it's my first big lesson in bureaucracy. I've had other big lessons. I'll tell you about them sometime. For now, though, I have a bunch more "broths" to fix. EDN

Steve Lubs has been an engineer in a variety of roles at the Defense Department for 30 years and has always argued with his bosses. Like Steve, you can share your Tales from the Cube and receive $200. Contact edn.editor@ reedbusiness.com.