



One Word

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Do you have topic ideas? Comments or questions?

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There is one little word, often inappropriately applied, that explains people's ability or inability to function as they should. And, if that word is not well applied, it results in the everyday messes we see in business settings, in governments and in the world around us. That word is 'Authority'. Stated another way, if authority was clearly understood and applied we would no longer see so many botched jobs – just read a newspaper for daily accounts of disasters.

What is Authority?

Authority is the ability of Doris, say, to state 'yes' or 'no' over the issue before her. It is the ability of Doris to decide conclusively by herself – by a single individual to conclude, without reaching to a higher level for permission. But here is the elusive key: it also means persons at higher levels, such as Tom, her boss, cannot reverse the decision made by Doris, the lower individual invested with 'authority'. If Tom, her boss, who sees Doris' decision as not to his liking, reverses the decision made by Doris, then the authority rests with Tom; Doris does not have authority. Tom, therefore, to truly invest Doris with authority, must live by the decision made by Doris even if he doesn't like it.

Delegation

What we are talking about here is the concept of delegation – where one assigns a task or set of tasks to another individual. Without getting into more details than a short paper like this allows, delegation is about passing authority to someone below you – and then standing back to allow that person to complete the task in that individual's own way or manner. (Hence, we

refer to delegation as 'the big divorce'. If you delegate, you can expand your workload – that is you can grow as a manager and as a business. But you must stand back – otherwise you have not really delegated. Delegation involves taking the risk to trust someone else and investing time in training someone to take on the job you could do easily yourself – and nurturing that person through the new challenge, allowing that individual to make mistakes along the way – for it is mistakes that create the deepest learning imprint. Not only will you grow, but the delegated person has a chance to grow – and of course, your business can expand too.

The Keys to Happiness

In other writings, this author has referred to the seven keys to job (and life) happiness¹. At the very top of that list is 'control over one's own domain'. The immense popularity of the automobile, the cell phone and Internet are because they give individuals control over their own transportation and communication domains, as never before – the ability to say 'yes' or 'no'

¹ See Happiness on the Job, CCCC postulates, January 2010



about these endeavors without interference from a higher level. No wonder that public transportation rarely attracts more than 20% of the population despite its so-called economic efficiency or that your teenagers 'must have' their own iPods or mobile phones.

How 'Authority' ties into the Job

An ideal arrangement in any company occurs when the individual workers become 'owners' of their jobs, rather than 'tenants' in their jobs. Just as home owners have control over their dwellings, so job owners have control over their own mandates within the job. In such situations, the boss focuses on the employees' outcome, not on the means to arrive at the outcome. This is called allowing individual autonomy, self actualization or what we like to call 'control'. People talk about employee motivation. You cannot motivate employees; you can only remove the de-motivators. And the greatest de-motivator of all is loss of control of the decisions that should take place by the worker within that job domain. If you pass authority to the worker you pass control to the individual, and thus, you 'motivate' the employee. Results will go up along with job satisfaction – as attested to by hundreds of studies and just plain common sense. All you have to do is think about what you yourself want in a job – namely less interference from the person above you. (And it may be the reason you became boss in the first place – to grasp that elusive thing called control over the job, or as we are stating here, gaining the ultimate authority.)

Accountability

Accountability, another often misapplied word, can be defined by a chain of 10 events², one of which is 'authority'. In the absence of authority, the chain is broken and accountability becomes impossible. For example, if you are in a job where you

are supposed to be 'accountable' but you do not have the 'authority' because your boss has the power to reverse your decisions you cannot really be held accountable. Authority must match the size of the task or responsibility before a person, otherwise the person cannot truly assume accountability for that task. Put yet another way, the person will not and cannot become owner of the job and will remain as a lackey, or job tenant, not accepting responsibility not only by apparent choice, but more importantly, not accepting responsibility by design. Result: another job that fails to meet the goals; another person made unhappy by the situations (actually two people, both the worker and the boss) – another mess!

Conclusion

As a boss, when you define a responsibility for a worker, give the level of authority to the person needed to complete that task. Then stop hovering in the background, but be available to offer advice when asked. Make the investment of risk and time in such persons and watch them grow before your eyes – and watch your enterprise expand as never before. Enjoy seeing workers become owners of their jobs, avoid the all too frequent messy situations of the past.

Good luck

Bill Caswell

² See The Accountability Mess, CCCC Newsletter, December 2007