

Command and control: a learning disability

Will this traditional belief system work for tomorrow's managers?

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Front line foremen, supervisors, superintendents, even middle managers continue to jump at the jolt of an edict from some "higher up." Sort of like a wave or an impulse originating from a power source. Yes, power—command and control from the top, resonating some unilateral goal or objective to all of the worker/supervisorbees—is the learning disability of the decade.

Being one level up from someone feels good, it justifies power-based behavior and is great dinner-time talk with the family about how "my people" do not care; how the other department is playing politics and how "my people" are lucky to have jobs.

And yet in a blink, the command and control community of smokestack industries shriveled. Yes, technology has played a major role in running a more efficient operation. All that aside, more output per person is the new norm, thus less people. The scenario is similar up and down a riverfront, a region and our nation.

Successful companies—down to the core worker—understand the realities of a global economy. Like it or not, the U.S. is a nation of 260 million people competing in a world of 5.7 billion people. We are a minority (4.6%) in the world's population. It is projected that 80% of the world's population will be made up of Asians, Africans and Latin Americans into the next decade—6 billion people—all of whom will be seeking to advance their economic status. How can the American worker not see the brutal competition this reality implies?

Somewhere, somehow, someone, amidst this world of 5.7 billion people, is trying to figure out a way to serve the customers better. Is that (reality) not enough motivation for a plant to pull together as a team, rather than individual departments backstabbing and competing against each other?

OK, technology and upper management aside, how can we—the core worker/supervisor—do more with less? The answer is in your belief system. Command and control is a layering belief system of unnecessary personnel paid to hover, smother, police, audit, punish and threaten. All for the false promise of job security and a 4% pay raise. Peter Block's book, *Stewardship* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.) vividly describes this. This belief system

focuses all energy on the organizational structure of compliance, policy and performance evaluations. Every mistake found justifies the need for more smothering, policing and auditing: more justification to command and control every business element. The self-fulfilling prophesy continues until we lose sight of why we are here—to produce a product or service for a customer.

This system (of command and control) really is not our fault. As an excited new mother asked her doctor upon giving birth to her child, "When shall I start her training?" to which her doctor replied, "About 200 years ago." That is exactly how deep-rooted the practice of command and control is within our management systems. Ever since the industrial revolution, society in general has cultivated a management style that has been totally in sync with the very products it produces.

Over time, we have gradually made the worker an extension of the machine, completely ignoring him or her as an asset and always evaluating them as an expense. We advanced the industrialized management machine through contributions of Max Weber, who coined the concept of bureaucracy and division of labor; and Frederick Taylor, the father of scientific management, who focused on worker efficiency as visualized in those old Charlie Chaplin silent movies of the assembly line. The actual result was mass production, mass profits and a massive betrayal of human dignity. Command and control management became the way our industrial society operated. Yes, we, management, created unions.

This system has become so engrained that we covet the belief (of command and control) and lose sight of why we are in the workplace. We should covet the belief to "serve." Service to a customer, client, department and coworker. When service is the primary focus and belief, all else "organizes" around *that* system. Teaming, partnering and power sharing become the structure centered on service.

So, foremen and supervisors: let me guess, upper management "talks the talk" of teaming but "walks the walk" of screaming, i.e., command and control. What should be done? While waiting for them to change, the place might shut down.

You must choose to change the belief system within your work group—yes, even among the learning disabled that surround you. The process at the very least will ensure employability, no matter who buys or runs your company. Core worker/supervisor; do not let anyone tell you otherwise. You are the key to any successful business.

To change the belief system to one of service is no easy task. It is probably easier to quit smoking or loose

twenty pounds. Recall how long it took to get into the habit of using a seatbelt? So, if you are up for the challenge of a career, try and develop these skills centered on an internal belief of service:

1. Build trust—In God we trust, all others must earn it. Treat every event as an opportunity to earn trust. To trust, one must be trustworthy. Even if it means admitting a mistake. Look at every interaction with people within your work sphere as an opportunity to earn trust. Believe it or not, it starts with the little things. For example, returning a phone call, saying hello and good morning or admitting you do not know.

2. Learn to value differences in other people and departments—do not draw a line and compete to win. Less talk and more listening. Listen for value, not for fault. Aside from trust, the essence of teaming is valuing differences.

3. Learn to look at other departments as customers and serve with the behavior of a world-class service organization. Yes, no matter how smug, arrogant or unappreciative, serve them your very best. Production departments: if you receive service from maintenance or engineering, treat them like reputable supplier, i.e., true partners with a common goal. Need there be mention of treatment to outside vendors and suppliers, also?

4. Coach, facilitate and counsel—human resources, accounting and quality control departments—this should be your mode of behavior. The traditional auditor, policeman, judge and jury over operating department do not matter. Treat that operating department as a customer and teach—not preach. Especially in staff positions, watch tone of voice and body language. Condescension is very obvious, so is sincerity.

5. Do and learn. Too not (do so) is a learning disability. Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline* (Doubleday), elaborates magnificently. Learning comes after the results of an event, thus, begetting better results from the next event. In short, the learning organization not only survives, it prospers. To chastise and criticize every failed event only stifles creativity and reduces people to play "not-to-lose" rather than to "play-to-win."

6. Learn new and do. On a broader note, learning a new skill adds value to your paycheck as well as to the company's bottom line. Do not get hung up on learning a new technical skill. Improving interpersonal skills will add immense value in your ability to get along in a team setting. Companies notice team players.

7. Establish relationships with those in your work sphere. Relationships foster openness. They eliminate the stigma of hierarchy, command and control, and lubricate the wheels for peak performance in a team setting. Peer group interaction corrects faulty performance or brings it to the forefront much quicker when in a team setting. The power of shared goals and objectives is awesome—especially with people you know.

8. Seek potential in people, not faults—a major shift in how you see your world. Of course, people are going to make mistakes. So what is new? Identifying mistakes is concrete, real and relevant to the issue at hand. Treating those mistakes as learning experiences (see item 5) and responding to the potential of that person to improve is "psychological." It is how you see the world.

This shift in how people visualize something is well documented. The teacher of a gifted class was mistakenly given an average class while the teacher of an average class was mistakenly assigned to a gifted class. After a semester, guess which class tested gifted? Yes, the gifted teacher, not knowing about the mistake, treated those average students as if they were gifted. The students responded with gifted results. The average teacher, on the other hand, not knowing the class was really gifted, treated them as average. They responded as average. How you see the world is how the world will be.

9. Praise and recognize—Find good, find success, no matter how trivial, and recognize it. If you cannot find it—at least say hello and good morning. Many supervisors and managers—at all levels—forget (or do not know) this vital fact. Recognition is a need. Recognition (or strokes as the psychologists coin it) is the basic unit of social interaction. If you think you can do without it, just try holding your breath for five minutes. You see, air also is a need. When you are deprived of air your body responds by increased breathing to replenish your air supply.

It is no different with recognition. Psychologists concur that most adults are recognition-deprived and, therefore, do things—consciously or subconsciously—to get attention.

Recognition comes in two flavors: 1) for a job well done or not well done; and 2) for just being a human being with a right to a place on this planet. This second form of recognition should be absolute and sincere at all times. It is unconditional and should not be tainted by any poor performance. Have you ever seen two lawyers go at it for their clients? Nothing personal, just two advocates doing the best for their clients. Refuting, questioning veracity, challenging the others legal premises; sometimes even being vicious and mean-spirited. Yet afterwards, they shake hands and go to dinner together.

How often in the workplace do we take a work-related disagreement and hold it personally against a person to the point that we do not say hello and good morning? The most basic form of unconditional recognition is a simple acknowledgment of existence. Thank you.

The transformation to service cannot be done at a seminar, dinner meeting or on a three-month binge. It is a growing process. The baggage of command and control acquired through the industrial revolution is *that* engrained. As a manager once said, "The definition of insanity is to keep doing the same things, but expect different results." To tap everyone's true potential in an organization, the shackles of the past must be removed. Worker/supervisor, if your leadership does not have the foresight to do so, then do it yourself. The self-help books are plentiful in any bookstore. This disability can be corrected. It is your choice to try. ■



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