

PAMPHLET 84

A HIGHER STANDARD

By

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@January 2005

I just want to be left alone to do my job. Don't ask me my opinion, don't share information with me, don't involve me in stuff. My supervisor can go and do all that. Don't bother me.

Employee of a successful energy company

The world is dangerous not because of those who do harm, but because of those who look at it without doing anything.

Albert Einstein

Normally I call for a leadership revolution. This essay calls for a follower revolution.

When I worked at the Star Tribune newspaper, I thought everyone wanted as much freedom as I did. The publisher once summoned me to his office. He said, "Heuerman you are one of the leading entrepreneurs in this company. I often marvel at all you get done. But sometimes you just keep going until someone says no."

Well, duh, Mr. Publisher, that is what entrepreneurs do. I always figured that if no one set limits, I would go as far as I could with whatever I was doing. If someone didn't like it, they would let me know. I agreed with Katherine Hepburn who said, "If you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun."

As a consultant, I push empowerment. I truly believe that those closest to the work know the work the best and are the right people to make decisions about the work that they do. I also advocate for employee involvement. I really believe that people only support what they help create, and I believe in the creative synergy of people who connect, reflect, and learn together. I've helped leaders make strong efforts at empowerment and involvement and find that the change from paternalistic cultures is slow.

Peter Block described a simulation his colleague Joel Henning designed, which rings true in most of my experience:

Three teams role-played high-control patriarchal leadership, cosmetic empowerment, and genuine participation and empowerment. The high control group was quiet, had their arms folded, and had one or two pale, informational questions at the end. When asked their feelings about the meeting, they said they felt controlled and punished.

The cosmetic empowerment team had many questions, all of which were cynical and reeked of barter and deal making. They asked, “What’s in it for me?” and “Where did this fad come from?” They wanted the leaders to prove their sincerity. There was a lot of laughter and energy during the meeting. Upon reflection, they felt manipulated and doubtful, although they admired the cleverness of the strategy.

The genuine participation group went last and when they shared their intention to involve everyone in defining the program and solution the employees would have none of it. They wanted a common vision and strategy, they wanted to know what was expected of them and were fed up with this soft, open-ended non-solution. They questioned who was in charge and who was going to steer the ship to a safe harbor. They wanted to know what management was going to do to fix the problem. In processing the meeting, they felt management had abdicated. The employees had 20 suggestions about how the team could have done a better job and voted no confidence.

What disturbed Block?

- We resent patriarchy and its dominance,
- We become cynical at attempts at cosmetic change,
- Yet faced with the prospects of real participation and accountability for an unpredictable tomorrow, patriarchy begins to look better and better.

Block concluded that while we may talk blithely about the end of command and control, emotionally we miss it when it’s gone. If we are offered real choice and power, we push our leaders back into a controlling and directive stance. Our lips may say no to a benevolent monarch, but our eyes say yes. Leaders see the longing for good parenting in our eyes, and they have little choice but to respond.

Genuine empowerment carries freedom, responsibility, and accountability with it. We get to make choices about the work that we do. We get to select between alternatives that matter. It is our job to make our decisions real and to implement action steps. We get rewarded or punished, praised or criticized for our choices and actions. We get to act like adults and are treated like grownups. Many of us don't want this level of adulthood in our work lives. Many of us, instead, want freedom from responsibility and escape from conflict.

Many people with power are threatened by those who do want freedom and use their power to sabotage empowerment. When they do, most workers crumble easily. Few stand up against the abuse of power. Often leaders and followers collude together to deny the potential empowerment offers.

Genuine involvement is messy, difficult, and time consuming. Reactive problem-solvers have to learn to be imaginative anticipators and that is hard to do—maybe impossible. People disconnected from others throughout their competitive work histories have to learn to listen, engage, connect, cooperate, compromise, empathize with others, and find win-win solutions. People who only feel okay when they are accomplishing a task have to learn to sit still, think, and engage with others. For them it feels nonproductive.

Many of us don't want to develop new emotional and intellectual muscles. When put in a situation that asks us to stretch, we can't get away from ourselves fast enough. We may prefer to be one of the walking dead so prevalent in our organizations. Aliveness is way too threatening for us.

Leaders need to be better at inviting empowerment and involvement and accepting “No” for an answer and adapting accordingly.

Or our talents may be better suited in other endeavors. Leaders also need to be better at matching talents to assignments so participation is more energizing for many. Just because someone is on the “leadership team” doesn't mean they can imagine and strategize. Just because someone is a “doer” doesn't mean they can't “vision” with the best of us. We need to assign roles based on talents, skills, and knowledge rather than positions on the organizational chart. Now that is a change that would get a reaction.

Finally many people with power get anxious when their organizations are energized and sabotage renewal—over and over again. Leaders need to be better at seeing how they and others set people up to fail.

Why do we need a higher standard? In the past decade alone billions have been spent on leadership development and employee involvement and empowerment programs.

Today Gallup research shows that 74% of American workers are disengaged clock-watchers who cannot wait to go home. We know that the vast majority of change efforts are deemed failures by those who lead them. The sustainability of Fortune 500 companies pales in comparison to its potential.

I am fed up with paternalistic managers who are threatened by the potential of others and sabotage those who try to evolve and mature in our organizations. I am tired of whiny and entitled employees and jealous or threatened people who sabotage good leaders and are too lazy to learn and renew themselves. I say, “Grow-up.”

I am disgusted that so many “bad guys” rule in so many groups. I recently met with ten high performers working on a new vision for their organization. I asked what blocked the organization from making changes. They made a list of things. At the top of their list they put three employees out of 50 who were negative and were against everything. They were upset with their supervisors for not dealing with the negative people. I wondered why the other 47 employees could not stand up to their peers who made their lives miserable.

I see this dynamic play out over and over in organizations: the few negative people dominate the many “good guys.” Robert Greenleaf wrote that the problem is not the bad guys. They will always be with us. The problem is the good guys who have gone to sleep.

I stood up to the bad guys every day for 18 years when working in the newspaper business. I do it as a consultant. I grow weary. The “good guys” need to help those of us who want to work in decent organizations for honorable leaders.

We need a higher standard for ourselves—leaders and followers alike.

I want the good to band together to bear witness against the bad—the truth-tellers to speak up to the liars and gossips. I want the mature to hold the immature accountable. I want the sane to stand together against the crazy. I want the responsible to confront the irresponsible. I want those who respect others to say “No” to the abusers of power.

More than a leadership crisis we have a crisis of personal responsibility.

I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous.

I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.

I can humiliate or honor, hurt or heal.

In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A colleague recently said to me, “This is an evolution. Not a revolution.” I disagree. Evolution works nicely in the natural world. In organizations, “it’s an evolution” is generally an excuse to do nothing, to avoid conflict, to abdicate leadership responsibility. We need a revolution led by rebels. We can choose a higher standard for ourselves as followers. We can choose to grow up. When we do, our leadership issues will go away.