

Responsibility versus Authority

Ironically, one of the most frequent questions I get asked as an executive coach is “What are the most common questions I get asked”? While the only important question is the one you are struggling with, there are a few questions and situations that seem to come up more frequently than others. I will address a couple of those in this inaugural column.

“How do I deal with the fact that they've given me responsibility for a task but not the authority to go with it?” I think all of us at some point in our career have had to deal with this situation. **Phase One** is to immediately recognize the situation and address it with your manager to reconcile the conflict between responsibility and authority as soon as possible. Often, this is all it takes to resolve your dilemma. In those cases where your boss is “unreasonable”, you move to **Phase Two**. I believe very strongly that *“True Leadership is the Exercise of Influence in the Absence of Authority”*[®]. Just what the heck does that mean? It means that most effective mid-level leaders and managers (like you) typically don't have clear and well defined authority in every area of their jobs. To overcome this hurdle, you must develop the ability to influence others over whom you have no authority in order to accomplish goals and tasks that are important to you and the organization. This is clearly easier said than done. It requires us to actively work to understand the other person: How do they think? How do they see the world? What is important to them? Unless you address their “WIIFM” (what's in it for me), you will never get them to fully engage in helping you accomplish your task. If you believe this doesn't work, evaluate the “informal” leaders in your organization. Those who have no authority at all yet are extremely effective at influencing others to take action that is often counter-productive to the organization. This is a skill that takes practice and work! Study those individuals you need to help you accomplish your task or objective in the context of their “WIIFM”. Then use your skills of persuasion and influence to gain the support you lack through simply authority. Those who master this skill set can change the world. This is why I firmly believe that leaders are **MADE** and not born!

Another common question that I receive is **“Why can't I just tell my people what to do and they do it?”** I am still surprised how often this frustration surfaces with managers and leaders. It seems that no matter what the situation, the approach taken by a large number of people is to simply tell our employees what to do with the rationale of “because I said so”. The only place this works is with moms and dads with small children... Now that I think about it, it doesn't work that well there either in all cases. If we can't make this approach work with our children, what makes us think this will work with our employees? The ultimate desire of the manager or leader in this situation is to have their people want to do something that they need to do. This is the quintessential element of leadership. People tend to follow a leader who has a strong vision, a good strategic plan, resources to accomplish the goal, and the ability to clearly communicate the goals and objectives to others. This individual will never have to worry about getting people to help him or her getting things done. Conversely, the person who simply says do this because I said so will always struggle to get people to do things for them. The intimidation factor alone will work as long as you are standing over them. But the moment you leave the area they will go back to doing what they think they need to do to get their job done. The answer to this dilemma always involves the four principles that I just iterated: a strong vision, a good strategic plan, resources, and the ability to clearly communicate what needs to be done and why it needs to be done and the benefits which the organization will receive by accomplishing the task. When these principles are present, people typically can't wait to get things done. I have found that most people always want to be a part of the winning team. A team that knows where they're going, what the future will look like when they get there, and

the benefits that they're going to achieve by accomplishing these goals, is seldom consumed with endless discussions and meetings about what to do.

I am looking forward to receiving your questions and various situations. I will be selecting one or two each issue which I think will be of most interest to the readers of this column. Never forget, ***“Wherever you are, be all there”*** -- Jim Elliot

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