



## Different But Equal...The Management Paradox

I walked slowly back to my desk from the HR office shaking my head and muttering “You’ve GOT to be kidding me!”. This was many years ago and I was not a Christian so I may not be remembering the *exact* wording...My HR Rep has just explained to me at a high volume and in great detail the fact that as a leader and a manager I had to treat my people exactly the same across the board. Sounds reasonable right? I now teach people the very same thing! But almost exactly one month before, the very same lady in HR had me in her office explaining (also at a very high volume...seems there’s was a pattern here) that as a manager and a leader I could not manage every person the same. She explained I had to take a different approach to each person to effectively manage them. Same lady, same office, two diametrically opposed “counseling” sessions. As a young manager, I thought she had simply lost her mind. How can you treat people differently and yet, treat everyone exactly the same? Seems impossible and a subject almost no management or leadership course tackles. Almost everyone I’ve ever spoken with struggles with this same issue. It is absolutely correct that we need to treat our people the same with no favoritism or inequalities. It is a known fact that no two people are the same and there is no “one size fits all” management or leadership strategy. So, let’s take a moment to clearly define when and where to “shift gears” to get this right as a quality professional. For my “experienced” managers, use this opportunity to help your young people through what seems obvious to us...now...after all the scar tissue and frustration. The key to knowing which technique to use is to clearly understand the definitions!

*The clear definition for Rule 1 is that when it is a matter of process, procedure, or principle, we are all created and managed equally.* No exceptions to the rule. You cannot play favorites and you have to employ consistency. Each person has to be held to the same standards and to the same levels of performance. When we look at process, procedure, and principles, we can use that as a landmark to know that we have to use what my team refers to as “Rigid Flexibility<sup>®</sup>”. We still have room to adjust and adapt, but everyone is equal in every way. Getting people to follow the process, much less sustain the process, can be maddening. But this is where we as Quality Leaders can play an outsized role in our organizations and ensure a minimum of variation and variability. We need to go to great lengths to ensure our people and our organization see us as strongly committed to Operational Excellence and standardization to the highest degree possible. And that means treating everyone the same when it comes to how we do things. I wish my HR Rep would have explained it like that...

One thing I learned early in my career is that people react very strongly to a perceived sense of injustice. The quickest way to provoke a serious issue in your team is for somebody to believe they, or a team mate, has been wronged. And nowhere can that perceived sense of injustice be triggered faster or more intensely than in how we treat people when under **Rule 1** conditions. Don’t let your young supervisors and junior leaders learn this lesson the hard way! Coach them on this ahead of time! And for my younger readers, ask your manager or your mentor about this aspect of leadership in our quality environment. Most often, we work with those over whom we have no authority. That makes it doubly hard. But I truly believe that “*True leadership is the Exercise of Influence in the Absence of Authority!*”<sup>®</sup> We can and should be doing this better than the rest of the organization because process, procedures, and principles are the very thing that truly drive our actions and our passions in quality!

*The definition of Rule 2 is understanding that when you are trying to grow, develop, or motivate your people, each person must be treated in a way that is uniquely individualistic.* As I’ve grown older, I’ve come to appreciate the truly impressive dynamic range that can exist between two people with very similar backgrounds. When faced with the exact same situation and circumstances, two different people can and almost always do react completely differently. As a young manager, this can be complexing, frustrating, and very confusing. Each person responds to different motivations, incentives, and guidance from you. Some need a bare minimum of input from you. Others need constant coaching and communication. Yet others are most comfortable working by themselves, while some people seem to need a team to get things done. You have to spend enough time with each to truly know their profile and their preferences. A major failure mode I see in young supervisors (and all too often in “experienced” managers), is to think that your people should and will do something just because “you said so”. Those days are behind us even though there are still too many operating as if that were a good thing. More and more today, people want to know the “why” for what they are doing to understand how it fits into the overall plan. Fewer and fewer people are willing to just do something because they were told. When it comes to developing your people and

growing your teams, you have to be willing to put in the time to figure out which approach is going to work best with which team member. Sounds simple...But it's not!

These definitions allow you to know which technique to apply by clearly understanding the definitions. I have found that the real key to great leadership is not in knowing "the one true way", but in knowing when and where to "shift gears" to change your approach! Understanding the situation and having more than one approach in your tool bag will put you on the road to being a great leader and a true Quality Professional!

If you have questions, comments, or a subject you would like to see in this column, contact me at [jrmcgee@x-slg.com](mailto:jrmcgee@x-slg.com)

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