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Empowerment

Misalignments between responsibility and authority. **by Dr. Eliayhu Goldratt**

Suppose that you have some responsibilities - a safe assumption no matter who you are or what you do. Now imagine that when you try to do your job (deliver on your responsibilities) you realize that certain actions, which are absolutely necessary, are not under your authority. You are not allowed to do them without asking for somebody else's approval, which s/he may or may not give you.

Do you think it's fair to ask you to be responsible for things that are not under your authority? Can you be empowered to take on more responsibility, if it is not perfectly matched with the required authority?

Now you see the base for my claim that misalignments between responsibility and authority are the core problem blocking effective empowerment. But my claim can be substantiated only if such misalignments are prevalent; if for almost any person in an organization there is at least one or more misalignments between his responsibility and his authority. Because, if misalignments are sporadic-as disturbing and unpleasant as they may be-it's hard to accept that they can be one of the main reasons blocking empowerment, that they can be considered a core problem.

So are misalignments between responsibility and authority prevalent or rare? Why don't we go and ask?

Well it's not so simple. It's not so simple because it turns out that the answer depends on what we ask. Ask any person if s/he personally suffers from such misalignments and almost always you will get a "yes," accompanied by more than one example. To verify that that is the case notice that, in a way, you were presented with this question when you read the first paragraph. Did examples of misalignment that you suffer from, pop into your mind?

Since almost any person claims that s/he suffers from misalignments our conclusion should be that misalignments are very prevalent. But if you ask the same person whether or not people who report to him/her suffer from misalignments between authority and responsibility, their sincere answer is: "Rarely."

So what is the answer? Maybe rather than interviewing people we should look at cases where there is interaction between an employee and his/her boss on a specific, detailed issue. A generic family of such interactions is called "fires": a person comes to his boss and demands an immediate action or decision. Not a rare event. As a matter of fact, most managers claim it is prevalent to the extent that more than half of their time is devoted to "fighting fires."

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Now let's ask ourselves two very different questions. First, why is the person demanding an immediate action or decision? The only plausible answer is that the "fire" is under this person's responsibility, and therefore the person seeks a resolution – or at least a cover for his rear parts.

The second question is, why did the person come to his boss? Do you really think that it's because the person believes that his boss is a genius? Probably the only prudent answer is that the person came to his boss because the action needed is not under this person's accepted authority.

It is now hard to escape the conclusion: probably every time a person comes to his boss with a fire it is a clear indication that, for this person, on the subject involving the fire, there is a misalignment between the person's responsibility and authority. Maybe not the formal authority given to the person, but the authority that counts, the authority that the person has assumed. And since fires are so prevalent, we must conclude that misalignments between authority and responsibility are much more common than we suspect.

This observation opens a myriad of interesting questions. Like how come there are so many misalignments? Is it because of negligence or because of a more fundamental reason, reluctance to share power for example? How come that even though misalignments are so prevalent, most managers are under the impression that misalignments underneath them are rare? Or another important question: are there other causes preventing or blocking empowerment to the extent that misalignments do – are there additional core problems?

But I think that, being practical, the question we should address first is how to pin down the misalignments. We concluded that: "probably every time a person comes to his boss with a fire it is a clear indication that, for this person, on the subject involving the fire, there is a misalignment between the person's responsibility and authority." But how do we find out exactly what is the misalignment; what is the specific responsibility that is not matched with which specific authority?

Pinpointing the misalignment.

Through an example let me demonstrate a simple, yet generic, way to do it. About four years ago, at the time that this know-how was still under rapid development, I explained all the above to a friend of mine, who is in charge of a small plant in Israel. He agreed with the logic of each stage (of course, not without a fight – we are both Israeli).

He agreed that misalignment between responsibility and authority will definitely block empowerment. He agreed that "fires" are an excellent indication of such misalignments. Without hesitation he admitted that fires are prevalent in his plant; "Hell, sometimes I think that we run this place by the seat of our pants." But then he insisted that his lieutenants do not suffer from any misalignments; "What you say is definitely

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true for the large organizations you are working with Eli, but in my little place I've made sure that everybody has all the authority they need. Actually, if anything, they have too much authority and not enough responsibility."

Going over the logical chain of cause and effect again did not help. He continued to maintain that in his plant there are no misalignments. I was about to lose my temper and leave, but he is a good old friend. So I tried another tack.

"When was the last time any of your people came to you with a fire?" I asked.

"About five minutes before you arrived," was his answer. "But it was not really a fire. Just a question."

"Tell me about it," I insisted.

After some prodding, I had the full story.

Uri, the person in charge of shipping, had a small problem. That day a shipment was supposed to go to a specific client. Everything was ready and at the shipping dock, but the client forgot to specify which of his warehouses the goods were supposed to be shipped to – this client has one warehouse in Haifa and another in Ashdod. Yosi, the account manager for this client, had been unreachable for three days, so it's no wonder that Uri came to my friend and demanded to know what to do.

"No big deal," my friend concluded. "I told Uri to wait another day, and tomorrow Yosi will be at the plant."

Then he summarized, "I told you it has nothing to do with misalignments, it was just sloppiness on the part of the client ."

That was not my conclusion. I thought that this was a clear case of misalignment between Uri's responsibility and his authority. "What need of the system is going to be jeopardized by the fire what's the damage Uri's concerned about?" I asked.

After some more explanations the reluctant answer was: "Clients' orders being shipped on time."

"That's Uri's responsibility?"

"Yes. Provided, of course, that the goods are on the shipping dock."

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That was our case so I shifted to looking for the missing authority. "What rule of the system prevents Uri from putting out the fire by himself?" I asked my patient friend.

"No rule," was the laconic answer.

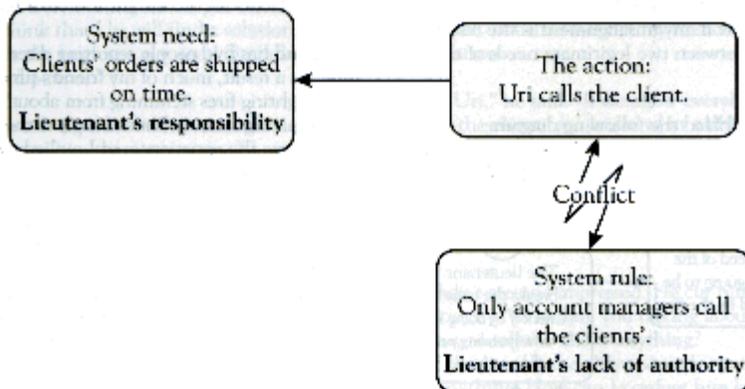
Well, we wasted some time until we agreed that there are rules of the system that are not written anywhere, but they are very abiding rules.

At last I squeezed out the answer: "Only the account manager is allowed to call the client." I know many companies with the same rule so I was not surprised. What did surprise me was that my friend still didn't see the misalignment.

"What would happen if Uri disobeyed the rule and called the client? Would he have been able to ship the goods today to the right location without involving you?"

"Yes, certainly."

"So the rule represents Uri's lack of authority," I concluded and wrote down the following diagram, summarizing his answers, just so I wouldn't have to go over it again and again:



My friend finally agreed, but he was apparently still disturbed. I thought I knew why, so, making sure that no trace of sarcasm entered my voice, I asked,

"What do you think about this rule that prevents Uri from doing his work without bugging you for help?"

"It's not as stupid as it sounds," was my friend's defensive answer.

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I helped him verbalize it by asking, "What need of the system is protected by this rule?"

"The need to provide the client with one contact point. You can't imagine the chaos we had before we instituted that rule. No, I'm not going to give up on it. It's a good rule. "

"I agree," I said, and added it to our diagram. Then I continued, "What is the lowest common objective both needs are trying to satisfy?"

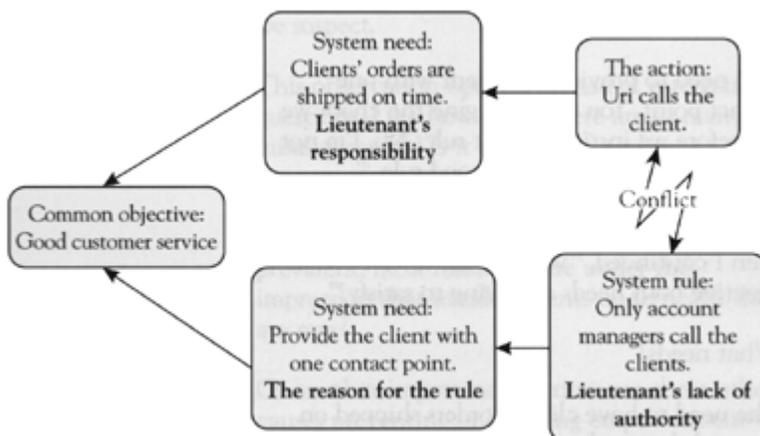
"What needs?"

"The need to have clients' orders shipped on time and the need to provide the client with one contact point," I clarified.

"We must have them both in order to have good customer service. Isn't it obvious?"

"So it seems," I said. And completing the diagram I urged my friend to realize what we exposed. The misalignment was not a result of negligence, and certainly not because my friend is reluctant to share authority.

The misalignment was a direct derivative of a conflict embedded in the fabric of the company. The objective was legitimate, the two needs were very real and so was the resulting conflict. Examine the diagram to see for yourself.



"Is it always the case," he asked. "Is every misalignment the result of a conflict embedded in the fabric of the organization?"

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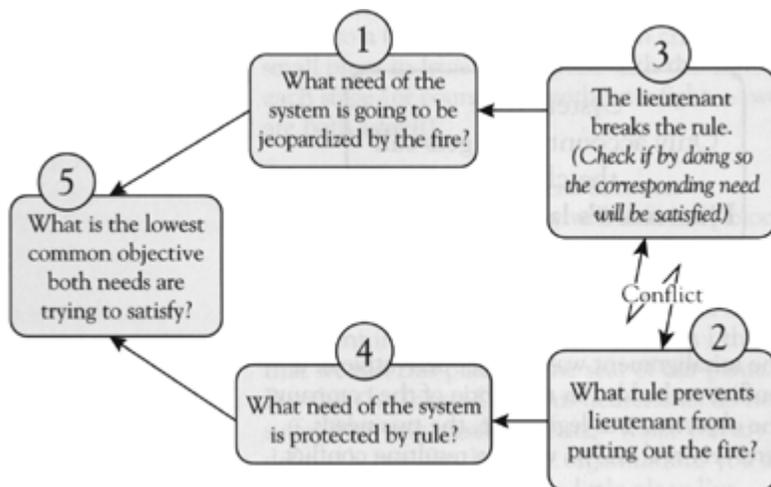
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At the time I didn't yet have enough experience, so my response was, "Let me write for you the five generic questions that I used. Whenever one of your lieutenants comes to you with a fire, of course first take care of the fire, but then take the time and answer these five questions. Do it in the sequence indicated by the numbers, please. Do it for enough cases and you'll know if any misalignment is the result of a conflict between two legitimate needs of the system."

And I scribbled the following diagram:



He just glanced at it, nodded and returned to examining the conflict of Uri. Which, I must say, irritated me a little bit. Here I am handing him the generic process to reveal the conflict hiding behind each misalignment and he is stuck on one particular, not-so-important, fire.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked him.

Without looking up, he answered, "I'm thinking about how I handled this particular fire, and for that matter, any other fire, and..."

"And what?" I said impatiently.

"And in each case," he continued to talk very slowly. "In each case I dealt with the fire by one ad hoc compromise or another. I never tried to deal with the conflict itself."

I kept quiet and after a short while he continued. "Is it possible that most of the fires I'm constantly dealing with stem from a handful of conflicts?"

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Eventually, it turned out that his speculation was not so far off the mark. Now we have enough experience to know that per person there are about three to seven misalignments between their responsibility and authority. These misalignments are a constant source of fires.

My friend has five people reporting directly to him. As a result, much of my friend's time was spent fighting fires stemming from about two dozen misalignments. But as I said, at the time I didn't have the experience, so I replied with an noncommittal grunt.

"It's even more disturbing," he continued to speak. "These inherent conflicts can lead to worse things than just fires that I can handle. I wonder how much damage, not to mention tension and tug-of-wars, these conflicts are causing. But, that's life. I don't see how I can prevent it."

"How come?" I was surprised.

"Look," he told me in a tone that indicated our discussion was reaching its end. "I'm not going to change the rule. Now, as well in the future, only the account manager is going to talk with the clients. It's too messy otherwise."

When he saw that I didn't agree he added, "Besides, even if I do change it, do you think that Uri will be overjoyed to take on more authority?"

I knew what he was talking about – not everybody wants more authority. As an Israeli I spent more than a month each year in the reserves. As a private. And lying in the shadow of a tree watching the officers running around like chickens without heads I always wondered what motivated people to take on more authority. It didn't preclude me from doing just that in my civilian life, but at least I don't take it for granted that all people want to be empowered.

"Why don't we call Uri in and ask him?" I suggested.

"Ask him what?"

"Let me handle it," I said. My friend has known me for a long time and for some reason or another trusts me. He picked up the phone and called Uri in.

Removing a misalignment.

While we were waiting for Uri, he asked, "Why do you think that Uri will find a solution? He is not the brightest guy and I doubt he sees the global picture."

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"Because solving this conflict is much more important to him than it is to you," I answered bluntly. "And as for seeing the global picture, you'll explain it to him, but only when I ask you to, okay?"

I had to emphasize it because in such matters the sequence is of utmost importance – you expose an issue in one way and you may raise strong resistance, while unfolding the same issue in another way can gain you enthusiastic collaboration.

When Uri sat down I took the diagram of his conflict and started. "The objective is to have good customer service," I declared.

Uri didn't respond, if you dismiss the shrug that probably indicated, "Here is another smart aleck, with baloney slogans."

I calmly continued, "In order to have good customer service, you, as a company, must make sure that customer orders are shipped on time."

Uri still didn't say a word, but I sensed him suddenly tense up. No wonder, I touched on his area of responsibility.

Now it was time to really wake him up. "Uri," I said, "this morning you didn't know whether to ship to Haifa or Ashdod. Why did you bother the plant manager? Why didn't you simply pick up the phone and call the client yourself?"

"Why? You really want to know why?"

And turning to my friend he poured out his opinion of the "rule". But he didn't call it a rule, he used much more vivid language (it doesn't take much to provoke an Israeli).

I achieved what I wanted. Now it wasn't a conflict of the system, something that could be dismissed as "that's life." Now Uri took it as his conflict. And judging by his emotions, quite a disturbing one. So calmly I turned to my friend and suggested that he explain why the rule makes sense, explain the "global picture."

The explanation was not what I expected. Being an outsider, I viewed "providing a client with one contact point" as something that helps the client. But that was not my friend's explanation.

"Look Uri," he said. "If we allow everybody to talk to the client, you know what will happen. Everyone tells the client different things, and then the confused client picks something that one person told him, combines it with something else that somebody else told him and we find ourselves in a real mess."

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Uri didn't seem impressed. He cut him off impatiently, "What are you talking about. Who is going to tell the client anything? I just need to ask the client something, not tell him anything. How can I confuse him by asking? If I was allowed to do it we could have shipped today, on time. Now we'll be late, and I'm telling you, knowing Yosi he won't be here tomorrow either."

My friend and I exchanged glances. Uri had a point.

Slowly my friend said, "Let me understand. What you're suggesting is that whenever you are missing information that you can't get any other way, when you need it, then you should be able to call the client and ask? Just ask for the missing information, not to tell them anything?"

"Yes, that's all. What's the big deal?"

My friend is an experienced manager, so he replied, "Let me think about it."

Uri left muttering, "What is there to think about.?"

Turning back to my friend, I asked, "Do you expect any problems with the account manager?"

"With Yosi?" he laughed. "When we have a late shipment, who do you think gets the phone call from the furious client? I will not have any problem getting Yosi's agreement. But I have to get it from him before I make this exception to the rule, not after."

"Good," I concluded. And getting to my feet to leave, I summarized, "You removed the misalignment, and from now on you will not have to deal with this type of fire. Why won't you do it systematically? Do it every time that one of your lieutenants comes to you demanding a decision or action?"

"I wish I could," he sighed.

I sat back down. "Why can't you?"

"Because I don't have you here all the time."

"What does it have to do with me?" I was genuinely surprised.

"Come-on," he said. "I won't say that you manipulated Uri to come up with a solution, but you definitely played him like a violin. I don't know how to do that."

"Do you want to learn?"

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"Frankly, no." And standing up he added, "I know my limitations."

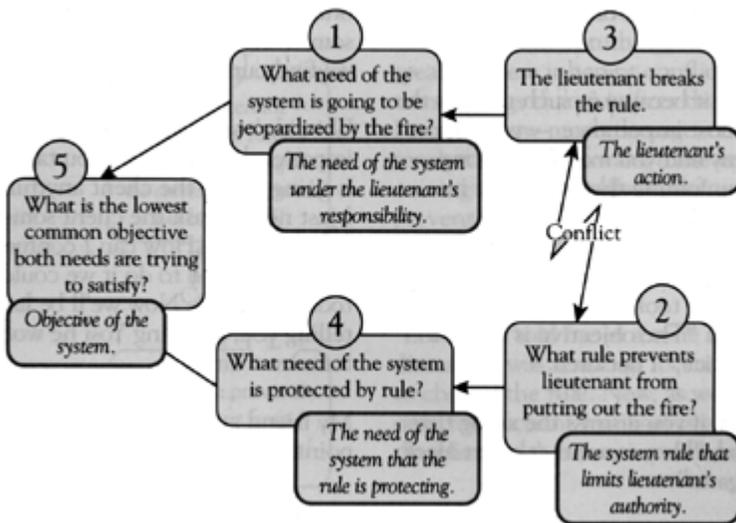
"No, you don't" I stared at him until he sat down again. "One of your lieutenants comes to you with a fire," I started to explain the generic process. "You now know that s/he came because of a misalignment between his responsibility and authority. You already know how to construct the diagram that exposes the conflict that caused the misalignment."

"Sort of," he said.

Pointing to the diagram outlining the five questions I asked, "What do you mean, sort of?"

"I guess I need more practice. One example is not usually sufficient."

I accepted and continued, "Generically, the result of answering these questions will be..." And I wrote down the answers under the questions:



"Once you construct this diagram," I continued to explain, "don't try to find a way to remove the conflict. You are too used to handling these conflicts by ad-hoc compromises."

Seeing that he didn't agree, I laid it on him. "You accept the compromises to the extent that just half an hour ago you claimed that none of your lieutenants suffer from any misalignment. They are the ones who don't accept them as satisfactory compromises. So, if you are not on an ego trip, call your lieutenant and start to expose the diagram."

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He nodded agreement, so I continued. "Always start from the objective," I pointed to the diagram. "And then move clock-wise. When you reach the third box refer to the specific fire that triggered the whole thing, and ask the lieutenant why he didn't put out the fire himself. If you noticed, that is exactly how I provoked Uri."

"You sneak," he smiled. "Of course the response will be to blame the rule."

"Remember," I cautioned him, "the lieutenant always knows the rule that makes his life miserable, but that doesn't mean that he knows the reason for the rule. As a matter of fact he usually doesn't. Which, once you explain it, allows him to look at the reason with a fresh view."

"Unbiased, you mean?"

"Not unbiased, not at all," I beamed. "He hates the rule. But he is not engraved, like you are, to accept the reason for it. The combination of a fresh view and strong emotion is powerful."

"I see," he thoughtfully said. "Do you think that it's powerful enough to always come-up with reasonable suggestions to remove the conflict?"

"What do you have to lose? Try it."

Since then, literally thousands of managers have tried it, and they claim it always works. Frankly, my expectations of four years ago have been surpassed.

But we have not finished yet. There is still a very important question that we haven't answered: Are there other causes preventing or blocking empowerment to the extent that misalignments do? Or in other words, are there additional core problems?

If there are, and we neglect to address them, empowerment will improve but we will not get the breakthrough we hope for.

The second core problem.

To find out whether or not there are additional core problems we must approach the subject more systematically. It's not enough to propose an hypothesis (like misalignments are a core problem) and validate it. We have to dive deeper, to the place that will enable us to deduce such hypotheses in a systematic manner.

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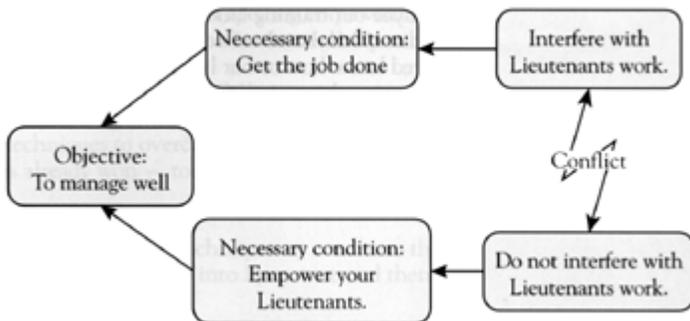
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If we assume, (as we are) that empowerment is a desirable thing to have, a good starting point is the conflict that empowerment forces on every manager.

The objective of a manager is, of course, to manage well. In order to do that, two different necessary conditions must be fulfilled. The first one was always there: in order to manage well a manager must make sure that, no matter what, the job gets done. The recognition of the desirability of empowerment brought forth the second necessary condition: In order to manage well a manager must empower his lieutenants.

So what is the conflict? Well, in order to empower your people you must not interfere with their work. Alas, sometimes, in order to make sure that the job gets done, you don't have any choice but to interfere.

The following diagram is a concise presentation of the conflict, with the arrows representing necessary conditions:



As long as the conflict exists we don't have any choice but to dance between the drops. Nobody is really happy, not you nor your lieutenants. Empowerment is in danger of becoming no more than lip service.

So let's concentrate on the place that blocks empowerment, on the valid observation that: "In order to make sure that the job is done you must interfere with the lieutenant's work."

What is an underlying assumption of this logical connection? Or in other words, why must you interfere? Because the assumption (which too often is very valid) is that they cannot do the job by themselves. Therefore, we must conclude that the only way to reach effective empowerment is to make sure that they are able to do the work by themselves.

If that's the case then the key question becomes: Why can't they do it by themselves; what is the nature of the obstacle standing in their way? There are two different valid answers to this question. The first, is that

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they don't have all the required authority. The second is that they don't possess all the required know-how.

The first answer leads us to the core problem we dealt with above – the misalignment between responsibility and authority. The second answer reveals that, as we suspected, there is a second, not-less-important core problem.

"They don't possess all the required know-how." But we do do something about it. Actually, we do a lot about it. Many organizations invest tremendously in formal training, and in every organization, in each department, there is a lot of on-the-job training.

So why is, "they don't possess all the required know-how" so prevalent? Maybe it is because of us? Maybe our training lacks an essential ingredient? Maybe when we try to transfer the required know-how to our lieutenants we are missing something vital? Or, to put it bluntly, maybe we simply don't know how to give clear instructions!

We don't know how to give clear instructions.

Let me demonstrate what I am alluding to by an honest-to-God true story. I live in a small town in the suburbs of Tel Aviv. Our neighbors have a few apple trees which had a problem.

In the spring, when the apples begin to form, there is a bug which lays its eggs inside the baby apples. Worms then hatch inside the growing apple, with plenty of fresh produce to fuel their voracious appetites. There is a solution which, although time consuming, is supposed to be effective. Paper bags are tied around the immature fruit, which then grows and ripens inside the bags, protected from the bugs.

Well, our neighbors decided to try this solution, and they told their daughter, "Put the apples into paper bags." They gave her the proper equipment, and left her to enjoy her task in the spring sunshine. They returned to find all the tiny apples sitting in paper bags, on the ground. Until today everyone in the neighborhood torments, the now grown woman, with the apple-bag-story.

If we want to empower people, it's important to not just tell them what to do, "Put the apples into paper bags." It is as important to tell them why. And here is exactly where we go astray.

Most of us don't even notice that the why contains much more than one element. An essential part of the why is explaining why the action is needed – to prevent the bug from laying her eggs in the apple. Notice that this explanation would still not have prevented the absurd result.

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So, another why has to be explained as well: why we take the action. In other words, what is the expected objective of taking the action – not to find half a worm when we bite into a ripe apple.

But that's not enough. Irritating as it is, we have to answer a third why. Why we claim that the action will satisfy the need to the extent that we will get the desired objective – the paper bag is sufficient to keep out the bugs. Explaining this would have prevented using bags with holes.

If you think that you are doing a fine job explaining to your people all the relevant why's, do the following check. Search for a case where you gave meticulous, clear instructions. You even wrote them down, step-by-step. Examine the instructions that you gave. What do you see? You see that you have detailed what should be done, and how it should be done. You have detailed the actions. What about the why's? Yes, you probably wrote the objective, and maybe the need for the entire procedure, but did you detail all the relevant why's for each and every action? If you did, you are a startling exception.

Why do I stress this point so much? For a few reasons. One, is that when we give instructions detailing the actions but not the why's, the chance is very high that, lacking the why's, a lieutenant will flounder. Our reaction then is to detail the instructions even more.

Have you noticed that the more detailed the instructions, the less the empowerment? Whereas if we do give the why's, the actions are much less important; the lieutenant is free to improvise his actions as long as the why's are satisfied. True empowerment flourishes.

But there is another reason. We do provide the why's, but you know when? When the lieutenant messes up, only then do we explain the why. We call it on-the-job training. No wonder it takes so long; the lieutenant has to make many mistakes until he squeezes out all the why's.

What blocks us from giving all the relevant why's? It's not maliciousness or hidden agendas, It's simply the fact that we are not trained to do it. We are not used to verbalizing through meticulous cause-and-effect.

Is it hard to learn? No. Start with any written procedure that exists in your department. For each step of the procedure insert all the three why's. Then, between each two steps of the procedure insert another additional why - why the latter step must follow the earlier one.

This work will bring you some major benefits. First: probably, in the efforts to explain the procedure (inserting the why's) you'll significantly modify it. The many managers who have done it report that they found out that at least 50% of the procedures they explained previously contained major errors or inefficiencies.

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Second: Using the procedures that outline all the why's shrinks the time required for on-the-job-training to less than 10%.

But most importantly, as you gain some experience, you'll get the third benefit: Whenever you discuss things with your people, naturally the why's start to take center stage, leading more and more to true empowerment.

Conclusion

At last, empowerment is recognized as one of the necessary conditions for an effective organization. Alas, as I have tried to prove in this article, the core problems blocking or impeding empowerment are not widely recognized. As a result, organizations do not employ simple, effective techniques to remove the obstacles preventing empowerment. Unfortunately, the same is true for two other, not-less important issues: communication and team-work. The core problems are not recognized and the techniques to overcome them are not devised. Rather, most efforts are still aimed to win a war that is already won – to stress the importance of empowerment, communication and team-work. I am afraid that if the core problems are not widely recognized and the techniques to overcome them widely used, empowerment, communication and team-work will first turn into lip service and then into a decaying fashion.

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