

If Management Would Only Stop Managing!

*When is management going to learn to trust those
“doing” the work to organize themselves?*

It was another classic example of management over-managing and not realizing that people are already self-organizing and often don't need management's "help". The scene was a two week training class for new consultants at a major consulting firm. The task before me and the other two facilitators was to coach these 36 would be consultants in the process of consulting. I had decided to start this particular day off with an experiential exercise as a catalyst for discussing the topic of "managing others."

I split the class into two teams of 12 people each. Four others were *Management* and the rest of the class was *Observers*. I brought the Management outside the room to explain to them what I was looking for as the customer of this exercise. The specific mechanics/goal of the exercise were not important. I was more interested in watching how they organized and worked together to achieve the task. After strategizing on their own in the hall for 10 minutes (already engaging in things the teams could do instead), Management came back into the room and explained the task to the two teams and said they wanted to work with just one of the teams until they figured out the answer to the challenge. They asked the other team to "sit tight and wait." You can guess how motivating that was for that team.

As the team with management's *help* struggled, the other team decided to go ahead and try it on their own. Without management there directing them in how to do it, they were able to quickly figure it out on their own through trial and error. Once this team had figured out the pattern, they were working on reducing cycle time as the other group continued to struggle. Management finally realized that the unsupervised team had figured it out and were moving ahead. Instead of saying "Hey, you guys seemed to have figured it out, can you help the other group?", one of them came over and said, "Wait, we almost got it figured out." It was really this manager's way of saying, "Hey, you didn't sit tight like we told you to." Luckily the members on the self-organizing team pushed back and let this manager know that they were doing fine on their own and to leave them alone.

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I had to chuckle as I realized once again that when people know what needs to be done and why, they can self-organize very effectively on their own.

Why was the unsupervised team able to self-organize so effectively? I reflected on Meg Wheatley's writings on self-organizing systems for insight. In her book *A Simpler Way* she notes that healthy systems need 3 Ingredients to evolve and sustain themselves:

1. Clear Vision/identity
2. Freedom to have diverse interactions and relationships between members of the system
3. Free flow of information

Clear Vision/Identity - This is a feeling of knowing why the system exists; what is its purpose/goal. For the self-organizing team, they understood the goal of the exercise and why it was important to them. They also knew what constraints they had to perform within (e.g., time, resources). Management, to their credit, did a good job of communicating this to both teams.

Opportunity for Diverse Interactions - To maintain a healthy system, the members must be able to freely mingle and connect with whomever they wish as they go about achieving their goals. This freedom for diverse interactions and relationships expands the options and possibilities within the system. The self-organizing team had no established hierarchy or rules about who should be doing what (or who should report to whom). They just let whoever had an idea that seemed to make sense have the floor.

Free Flow of Information - Healthy systems are open systems. All members have access to all information and are free to share it with whoever it makes sense to as quickly as possible. This means that all people in the system have access to immediate feedback on their efforts, and the feedback should be a dispassionate response to how the current strategy is working (or not working). The emphasis is on circulating the feedback quickly so that

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adjustments can be made immediately. It is not focused on affixing blame when things aren't going well. The self-organizing team quickly learned that the fastest way to figure out the task was through trial and error. The important thing is that after each unsuccessful attempt, rather than waste time finding someone to blame, they in essence asked, "What did we learn from that attempt so we're smarter on our next one?" To the untrained eye, this period of trial and error may have seemed chaotic. There were many conversations going on sometimes and little planning. It was more a series of action, then reflection, then action again. But through this series of attempts, you could see that the team was starting to figure it out. The solution was emerging. (Meanwhile, back at the *Not* OK Corral, the team with management's help was getting more and more frustrated.)

The fact that the unsupervised team was able to be so much more effective than the supervised one made for a rich debrief after the exercise. The exercise demonstrated the concepts of self-organizing systems better than I could in a lecture/discussion (reinforcing my belief in learning through doing). The unsupervised team didn't need much to get started. They certainly didn't need a motivational pep talk, or defined and rigid roles and reporting relationships. They just needed a clear understanding of what needed to be done, why it was necessary and any other customer/process requirements and constraints. As management, once you've done that, you have one other very important thing to remember to do, **get out of the way!**

* Wheatley, Meg. *A Simpler Way*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996.

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