Keeping It Simple: Leadership AND Empowerment in One Conversation

Out of curiosity, I went onto Amazon.com the other day and did a book search on “Leadership”. When I did this about 4 years ago, I remember getting about 6000 “hits”. Today the number was *59,000!* Adding “business AND leadership” to the search only narrowed the choices to 48,000. Has there been that many more leadership books written in the last few years?? More importantly, do we *need* 48,000 books speaking to leadership in business?

I, for one, don’t think leadership is all that complicated. When I work with business leaders I tell them I think they can provide both leadership *and* empowerment *in one conversation.* You don’t need to read 48,000 or even 48 books. I summarize the process in one page (see figure X.) While the process is simple and straightforward, it often is challenging for new leaders.

The Initial Dilemma

Many new leaders struggle in the beginning with the paradox of when to exert “strong leadership” in team decisions vs. when to “empower” their team to make a particular decision. Exert too much direction, and they are accused of being domineering or micro-managing. Empower too much and they run the risk of being called indecisive.

The process I suggest is both simple and, I feel, intuitive. It helps provide teams both the direction they need (the leadership part) and the boundaries they must be aware of (the empowerment part).

The Process

For any project, task, or endeavor you want your team to engage in, there are 6 basic questions to be answered:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?
- How?

How to Provide Leadership AND Empowerment in One Conversation

Using the Model: For any given task, project or initiative, there are six fundamental questions to be answered, and it is more effective to discuss them in the order described below.

	Main Questions →	***Leader/ Teams Actions*** →	***What it sounds like***
1	**What?** **Why?**	**Leader offers/ clarifies**	"Here's what I think we need to do" or "What's your under- standing of what we're trying to do?" "Let's talk about why this is important to the business, our department, the team, etc."
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2	**Who?** **When?** **Where?**	**Leader & team define boundaries**	"Here's who needs to be involved…" "This is the timeline we're being asked to meet…" "This is where it will be implemented…" "This is our budget…"
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3	**How?**	**Leader gets out of way; team *self*-organizes**	"If you're clear on *what* we need to do and *why*, and the constraints we need to do it in, I'll leave the *how* to you. Let me know where I can help."

Keeping It Simple…

Answering these questions in the sequence below will help you navigate where and when to step in and when to back off:

1. You provide *leadership* by first answering the questions of "WHAT" and "WHY" for the group. *What* do we need to accomplish and *why* is it important to the business that we do so.
2. You discuss and clarify with the team the real boundaries they are dealing with: "WHO" needs to be involved, "WHEN" it needs to be done, and "WHERE" it needs to occur.
3. You *empower* the team by leaving the "HOW" up to them.

Sounds pretty simple, and it is, but being disciplined about is not so. The process usually breaks down in one of two places.

Breakdown #1 - *The Missing Why*

When I show a workshop group a visual of the process and ask them where they think the process first breaks down, they remark "We're usually given the "what", but we often don't get a "why." I remark back that this is something I hear consistently and it's troubling.

Without getting into all the reasons this might occur, I'll tell the group that I, personally, feel an obligation to give *any* group I ask to do something a compelling reason why. What's a *compelling* why? In the business sector, a compelling why means you ask people to do something because it's going to ultimately help the organization do one or more of the following:

- Better satisfy customers and ultimately increase revenues
- Become more efficient and effective in their processes and drive productivity
- Improve their cash flow position, and/or
- Improve their relationship and image in the community

In my mind, these qualify as compelling reasons a leader should give their team when asking them to do something. The only other type of reason that may be valid and does not fit the above would be because a regulatory type of agency (e.g., the FDA) requires it. As a leader, if you can't make a connection between what you're asking your team to do and one of the reasons above, they have the right to ignore you. All too often, I have heard of leaders, still today, offering downright lame and very patronizing reasons that include:

Keeping It Simple…

"Do it because.."

a) *"I said so."*
b) *"That's your job!"*
c) *"It's one of my performance objectives."* (the assumption here is that the objective set at the beginning of the year still makes good business sense)
d) *"My boss said we had to do it."*

What's so important about a compelling "why"? *Most* people need and want to understand how what they are being asked to do connects to some bigger picture. The fact that a small percentage of people don't care or want to know, is no excuse for dismissing this step. Bottom line, when people don't have a compelling "why", they won't sustain their effort.

Recognizing Our Shared Responsibility

As an employee, it can be very frustrating when we're being asked to do something and not given a why or are given one that's not very compelling. At the same time we must recognize our responsibility for seeking one out. Before we let that leader walk away without providing a good "why", as good employees, better yet, as good citizens, we need to push back until we get one.

Breakdown #2 – The Prescribed How

When I ask these same workshop participants the other place the process tends to break down, they'll say "at step 3… we're often *told* how." This is a hard one for new leaders to work through. For many of them, they were promoted mostly *because of* their ability to deliver on the "how". Yet it is the first thing they need to let go of when they move into a leadership position. Easier said than done.

Nevertheless, the process isn't complicated. You provide leadership by offering a clear "what" and a compelling "why." You empower by defining the real boundaries for action and leaving the "how" up to the team. If you stay disciplined with this process, I think you will find that people will *want* to work with you, and you build a team structure that's more flexible, independent and sustainable.

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