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Leadership

From the Editor

Bill Cosby is widely credited for having made this observation: “I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.” Pretty good stuff, I'd say, from the guy who introduced us to Old Weird Harold and his other buddies from South Philly. We all know individuals who have failed spectacularly when they have tried to make everybody happy. The unfortunate outcome is that no one is happy in the end.

He may not have intended the wisdom for organizations but I think it applies equally well: the key to failure is trying to please everybody. The more prudent path is to make choices and focus the resources you have.

In large measure, that's what strategic planning does for an organization — defines mission, vision, values, strategies, and tactics and thereby creates the basis on which day-to-day choices can be made.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

My guess is that there isn't a child in this world who hasn't heard this pleading question from a parent: Why can't you just do what you are told? As children we got the point — life is a whole lot easier if you comply.

Some people may have learned that lesson too well and arrive in work environments waiting to be told. Most of us understand that there are times when you do what you are told and there are other times when doing what you're told is just plain dumb.

In this article, Stephen Baetz explores several guidelines which help individuals sort out how to determine when to do what you're told and when not to.

Stephen has been writing these articles for Management Perspectives for the past 30 years. Many previous issues can be found at www.liveconsultants.com.



Stephen Baetz

Know When To Disobey

Cyrus H. Curtis must have been astute. Why? First of all, in 1886 he purchased *The Saturday Evening Post* for \$1,000. He obviously could recognize potential; he took a risk that the paper that Ben Franklin had started 158 years before could turn itself into something worthwhile. Second he recognized it was best for him to step out of the way and let others who knew more run the editorial side of the business. So he hired an editor by the name of George Lorimer who, in turn, succeeded in luring top writers and talented illustrators to the magazine, not the least of which was Norman Rockwell. Most of us, I would venture to say, find it difficult to let others take over when our leadership is at its limits. And third, he made this observation — “There are two kinds of men who never amount to much: those who cannot do what they are told, and those who can do nothing else.”

I recognize that the first two pieces of evidence offer insights into risk taking and self-awareness: two assets that are, without a doubt, fundamental to successful leadership. However, it is the wisdom in his observation that really catches my attention. With that statement, he charts the territory of a rather interesting dilemma: How do you know when to do what you are told and when you ought not to? In Curtis’s estimation, if you can’t figure that out, you will “never amount to much.”

The Pressure to Conform

Are there situations in which doing what you are told is valuable? Sure.

Do what you’re told when

- health and safety are involved,
- company values are at play,
- doing something one way or another doesn’t matter in terms of expected outcomes,
- a better way has been found, or
- you’re new and just learning how to do a task or function.

The list might be *slightly* longer if we were to give it more sustained thought. But the point is clear, I trust; the list isn’t very long. What is far

more extensive are the arguments in favour of obedience.

- ✓ Do what you’re told and there will be less conflict and confusion.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you won’t develop a reputation for being uncooperative.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you’ll be more efficient.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you’ll fit in.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you’ll be seen as dependable.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you’ll be seen as a team player.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you’ll make fewer mistakes.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you’ll see that we weren’t so wrong after all.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you can’t go wrong.
- ✓ Do what you’re told and you’ll suffer less stress.

These arguments in favour of conformity (for people to do what they are told) are tied to fundamental human needs and desires: to belong, to be valued, to be trusted. When those needs marry with informal recognition systems, the pressure to do what you are told can be enormous.

The Downsides

Imagine what happens if a culture of conformity is created and people simply do what they are told or, even worse, do what they *think* they have been told. At a minimum, fewer fresh ideas are offered, individuals feel that it’s better to read the manager than it is to read the problem, innovation decreases, and the organization develops a reliance on a limited number of people who are deemed to know what is best and are capable of telling everyone else what to do. As well, lethargy can set in and people can come to the conclusion that they are nothing more than the extension of a machine: something that does as programmed rather than doing what is best.

When lethargy grabs hold of an organization, it's never long before the machine turns on the masters and cynicism takes hold: "They don't know what they're doing" becomes the rallying cry in lunchrooms and at coffee urns. At those times, chapter and verse examples are offered that indicate that what they had been told to do didn't make sense in the first place.

In the worst case, one could be asked to engage in unethical behaviour. It's a weak defence to say, "I was just following orders."

The downsides seem so significant that it would be easy to conclude that you'd never want to do what you've been told. But there are, as we noted earlier, situations in which doing what you're told is best.

So we're back to the question: How do you know when to do what you are told and when you ought not to? Consider these guidelines when making that decision.

Guideline 1: Test every action against personal and corporate values.

Values are moral benchmarks against which we ought to evaluate our actions. That means we should be asking questions of ourselves like, "Is what I am being told to do honest?" or "Does what I'm being told to do treat others with respect and dignity?" or "Is what I'm being told to do safe?" If the answer is no, don't do what you are being told to do. If the answer is yes, consider some of the other guidelines.

Guideline 2: Ask, "How important is consistency?"

Process environments usually require adherence to a prescribed way of doing a set of steps. If what you're being told to do is part of a process and it has been found to be useful, do what the process indicates you should be doing (given of course that it doesn't violate personal or corporate values). If, in executing the process, you realize that there are flaws, find ways to get your voice to the decision-making tables where process improvements are made. But avoid the temptation to do it your own way in the interim. The cost of

free-lancing in situations like this can be substantial and counterproductive for both you and the organization.

Guideline 3: Assess whether you are in learning mode.

If you are learning, the most appropriate thing is to do what you are told once you understand the reasons for it. Typically others won't listen to you if you challenge or change something before you understand it and try it.

If you're not in learning mode and you see that there is a better way, offer it up.

Guideline 4: Test the action against goals.

If what you are being told to do, works against what you and the organization are trying to accomplish, use your better judgement and don't do as you are told.

The key is to make sure that you are making that decision relative to goals and not on the basis of what is easiest or convenient for you in the moment.

Guideline 5: Never do something that is just plain dumb.

Yes there are times when what you are told to do is just plain dumb. We've already alluded to two of those situations: acting against values or acting against goals. The other obvious situation occurs when the circumstances have changed from the time you were told to do something (Time A) and the time the task is to be acted on (Time B). In the lapse time between A and B, additional knowledge could have been acquired or significant events could have occurred. When this happens and the action becomes inappropriate, don't do it. There's no virtue in malicious obedience.

An Obligation

Whenever we make the decision not to do what we are told, we have an obligation to be clear about why. If we can do that, even Cyrus H. Curtis would be impressed.

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