

Grassroots and Nonprofit Leadership

A Guide for Organizations in Changing Times

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Chapter 7

RECOGNIZING AND SHARING LEADERSHIP

Dealing with Issues of Authority and Control

RAFTING ON A RIVER IS A LOT SAFER—AND A LOT MORE FUN—IF companions work out ahead of time who decides what, when. Which rules are chosen for the trip may be less important than clarity in choosing them. Leaving leadership questions unanswered often leads to resentment, alienation, and even an overturned raft.

Be straightforward about issues of authority and control. Clarify what decision-making roles your organization needs. Invest the people in those roles with the authority to make decisions. This is different from influence, or informal leadership. You have influence if people take your opinions seriously; you have authority if you have the right to make certain kinds of decisions. Most organizations place authority for making policy and deciding legal matters with the board while operational authority is vested in the staff.

In this chapter we focus on one function of authority: coordinating the work. Every successful group needs at least one person to think about the whole and coordinate its parts. This function may be carried out by a collective rather than an individual. If the organization designates this function to a chair, executive director, or staff collective, we call it authoritative leadership. This chapter is addressed to those authorized to make decisions on behalf of the organization, whether executive director, staff collective, board, or whole membership.

The staff in the social justice department of our denomination got excited about the concept of collective, so we became a team without a director. It went great: productivity and morale increased. The one person who put out less work was Ann, who was greatly enjoying the new structure. She was doing OK productivity-wise, so there was no pressure to replace her. I don't think any of us understood her role until Ann moved two years later to another part of the country. A few months later, with unresolved problems piling up, I reflected on what it was Ann really did while she was away from her desk chatting with us all and running across the hall to visit with the overall administration of the denomination. I thought she, outgoing personality that she was, was simply "relating." In fact, she was coordinating, troubleshooting, resolving interpersonal tensions, gathering and processing agenda items for our collective meetings, heading off trouble from the administration. Only in her absence did I understand that a successful team needs at least one person to think about the whole group, even if that's only done informally. Strategic thinking might happen fine in meetings, but maintenance of a successful team needs a lot more than meetings!

—a Quaker peace activist

Individuals and Authority

Be honest with yourself about how you maintain your power. There are qualities that add to your influence other than additional authority, such as expertise, conflict resolution skills, or charisma (in some cultural traditions). Ask yourself: "Do I maintain power by withholding information from others that they could reasonably and responsibly use?" "Do I avoid defining the limits of my (or our team's) authority?"

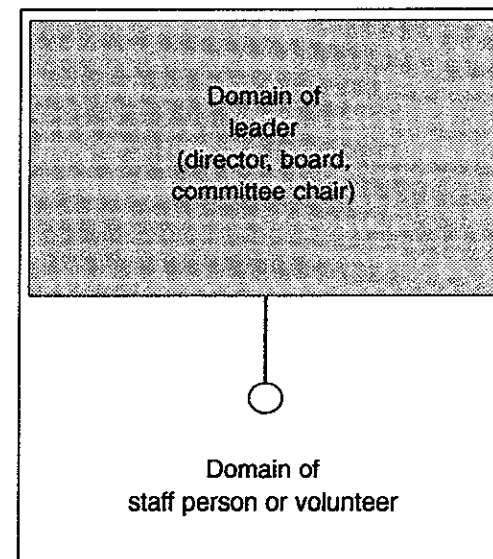
Controlling information and access to it is an age-old practice. Less widely understood is the second problem that arises in organizations: vague and changing limits of authority. It's common for leaders* never to define how much authority they have, and therefore always to be in a position to take what they think they need. Others

* For convenience in writing, we refer to "leaders" or "the leader," who could be a manager, board chair, executive director, team coordinator, board of directors, or other individual or group with authority.

are left dangling, unable to know whether they have the authority to do what's called for in a particular situation.

Imagine authority being divided into that used directly by the leader, that shared between the leader and others, and that delegated to an individual or committee. Each of these three areas of authority can be larger or smaller, depending on the trust of the leader and others in the organization, the maturity of the other units, the types of tasks or problems being tackled, and organizational structure.

Organizations often fail to define the authority of their leaders. Left vague, the authority exercised by the leader will vary depending on his or her willingness to share responsibility with others. This "window of authority" will vary in size almost as if there were a windowshade which could be drawn down or let up at the discretion of the leader. If the leader sees things going well, she or he will raise the shade and let more authority be shared. But if the situation is difficult or trust is in short supply, the windowshade is drawn down and the authority of other units is restricted.



WINDOW OF AUTHORITY WITH WINDOWSHADE

Leaders typically hold on to more authority than they need, "just in case." This is self-defeating because the authority a leader doesn't need most of the time, other people do need to do their work in the most effective manner possible. Activist work often requires timeliness: getting coalition spokespeople lined up quickly for a news conference, calling a demonstration to respond to police brutality, getting a grant proposal in before the deadline. If staff or committees are unsure whether they can act quickly and decisively, valuable time is lost and impact is reduced.

To understand fully the windowshade effect, we need to watch an organization over time. A leader moves the shade up and down depending on the situation and her or his own levels of anxiety and trust at any given moment in time. Other units in the organization (program staff, for example) learn quickly that the key to success is not to disappoint the leader, because to do so would reduce their ability to act or the degree to which they are given responsibility. A subtle game begins to occur. While the leader looks out through the window of authority to determine the degree to which she or he is willing to delegate responsibility, the staff member tries to discover "what the boss wants" and what success would mean for him or her. A collusion occurs in which staff members give away independent thinking, creativity, and risk taking in return for being acceptable to the boss. Eager to avoid mistakes in the short run, they reduce their initiative and creativity in the long run: initiative and creativity can flourish only in an environment where it is OK to take risks and to make mistakes. The result is declining motivation, stimulation, and interest, as dependency on the authority figure increases.

From the point of view of the leader, initiative declines among staff members and volunteers. The leader then feels increasingly inclined to hover over the group making sure that responsibilities are carried out "just right."

Through the following fictional anecdote we can see one way passivity and dependency grow in an organization when leaders move the windowshade up and down rather than defining the limits of their authority.

Maria, the chair of a small housing action organization, asked Jo to organize the October fundraising drive. Jo gave an enthusiastic "yes," seeing this as a chance to impress Maria, do something useful for the organization, and extend her own skill level. She attacked the project with vigor. Proud of her progress two weeks later, she reported back to Maria to review the project to date.

"Jo, you've really jumped into this project; I wish more people around here had your enthusiasm," Maria began. She then went on to ask, "Have you thought about...?" "If I were you, I would think seriously about... "I like this, but you might want to consider..." "In my experience, I've found it useful to..."

The longer the meeting went, the more deflated and depleted Jo felt. What Maria thought was helpful advice was experienced by Jo as second-guessing that showed Maria's lack of confidence in her. Maria was backseat-driving! If Maria knew all this information, why didn't she share it in her briefing at the beginning of the project? By the end of the meeting, Jo trudged out to complete the project out of obligation rather than enthusiasm; it no longer felt like Jo's project, but something she was doing for Maria.

Maria probably thought she was coaching rather than being a "boss." From the point of view of Jo, Maria gave Jo both responsibility for the fundraising drive and the authority to make the needed decisions, and then in the meeting took the authority back, despite the soft rhetoric of suggestions rather than orders.

Removing the moveable shade from the authority window means defining the authority clearly, including its limits. Removing the windowshade enables delegating genuine authority to others. Develop a clear and widely shared understanding of where the authority of each unit begins and ends in relation to the critical issues and projects of the organization. Put in writing where the authority of the leader ends as well as begins. The more authority and control a leader can give up, the more influence she or he generally will be able to attain. This does not mean giving up all one's authority—accountability, after all, requires some authority.

The amount of authority and control given to staff members and volunteers depends largely on the complexity of the task and the individual's readiness to take it on. In the short run, it is easier to tell

someone what to do and how to do it than to take the time to delegate a project, establish the boundaries of your own authority so they know it really is their project, create an effective process of accountability, and make yourself available for coaching. It is tempting, but the cost of thinking only of the short term may be dependency, lack of initiative and creativity, low morale, and internal power struggles.

Coaching provides a way for a leader to relate to a staff member or volunteer who needs direction, support, and suggestions. How much direction and support is given at any time is one of the judgment calls coaches need to make. The more the staff member can be coached into asking the tough questions on the job, clarifying criteria for success, and laying out plans that can be openly discussed, the less the leader has to do it for them. There's a natural balancing act in the relation between leader and staff member; good coaching is understanding how much information and advice must be provided in relation to each task.

If you have been drawing the windowshade up and down and want to change that dynamic, start by explaining your past practice. Invite your team to assist you in changing by asking, each time a task is coordinated, what the responsibilities and authority going with the task are, how success will be measured, how the task will be supervised, and what your role will be as coordinator and coach.

Staff and committee meetings are opportunities for nurturing clear boundaries. At the beginning of the meeting, clarify each agenda item by asking if a decision is needed, who will make the decision, and what type of action needs to be taken. On some issues, the leader needs the advice and counsel of the group before making a decision. On other issues, the group itself may decide. Raising these questions at the beginning of each meeting empowers staff or committee members to clarify their own participation and even to question where the decision should be made; they demystify where authority lies in the organization.

It's often the case that a group has internal disagreements about how its decision-making structure should operate. Members can usually live with a structure they disagree with, deciding either to work to change the structure over time or to accept it while giving priority to other areas of work. What hurts morale is a covert and inconsistent structure, where a windowshade is drawn up and down

and those not in leadership are left hanging.

A leader is frequently faced with the dilemma that people want her or him to make a decision and hold on to the authority so that they will not have to face the possible consequences of making the decision. This can be exacerbated when operating in crisis mode, which seems to demand immediate decisions and solutions. It is easy for leaders who are bright, quick, and motivated by a sense of urgency to be tacitly expected to take on more authority in such situations than is necessary.

People may be uncomfortable with shared authority when mistakes or wrong choices can have negative consequences. The reality is that growing in our power and competence usually means operating outside our comfort zone—beware of protecting people from discomfort and maintaining their dependency. Consider:

- Increasing authority has been proven to be a much greater morale booster and reward than increasing wages. Rod Napier has found that soon after wages are increased staff members tend to see themselves as having deserved the increase, and therefore the raise was a matter of simple justice.¹
- Shared leadership means shared ownership of consequences, both the high of success and the low of failure. Every organization has its tough times, which are much tougher when people scapegoat a leader instead of owning the problems together.
- Increased authority and responsibility yields more initiative and creativity, both of which are critical for success in social change. Because social change happens in what consultants call a turbulent environment, rigid or centralized authority is actually dysfunctional.²
- As a leader your role can shift from the harried manager trying to get people to do what you would do with their task, to a coordinator of projects and a coach of people, supporting them to do the work.

Steering Committees and Problem Solving

Ask yourself if problems are cropping up faster than you can solve them. There are times in every organization's life when problems seem

to multiply like rabbits. No matter how many hours the director works, no matter how much the board chair worries, problems clamor for attention. The stress of this white-water condition often makes leaders feel they need to take more control, while others complain about the demands made on them but take little responsibility for dealing with the problems. As leaders become less flexible and others have less autonomy, organizational democracy suffers and problems keep growing.

If you're wise you know there's nothing wrong with having problems. Problems are like weights are to the weightlifter. As we tackle problems we get stronger. When the problems fly at us faster than we can handle them, we need to increase our organizational capacity for problem solving. One democratic, participatory way of doing this is through a steering committee.

You may know the term *steering committee* from other organizations where it is used to describe a group that leads or "steers" the organization, functioning more or less like a board or an executive committee. As you will see, that is not the way we use the term in this chapter.

Create a steering committee to prioritize and facilitate problem solving. A steering committee does not take the place of the board, executive director, staff collective, or other leadership structures, because its job is not to make substantive decisions. The steering committee collects issues, concerns, opinions, data, information, and ideas and sends them to the right places. It prioritizes the problems to reduce overload. It is a clearing-house open to all parts of the organization, especially those most alienated. It is the answer to the complaint: "I can't get the director or board to pay attention to this!"

Elect the steering committee in a representative way. The typical steering committee consists of five to twelve members, depending on the size and complexity of your organization or work unit. Members are elected by staff members and volunteers in a way that represents the breadth of the organization. One committee position is for the director or designee. The board also may be represented. They need to be elected not as power brokers but for their wisdom and good sense, since their role on the steering committee involves delegation and organization much more than power and influence.

The group will meet regularly (how often will depend on the size

of the organization and complexity of the problems) to talk about the issues that are blocking the organization's effectiveness in operating or in reaching its goals. Before it starts its work, the group needs a training session on its mission, group dynamics, holding effective meetings, and rules and procedures. Steering committee members must understand their roles and figure out effective ways to get their tasks accomplished.

Physicist Fritjof Capra uses the metaphor of a tree to describe an organization: both the leaves and the roots provide nourishment. Trees grow through energy transfers upward and downward, just as organizations do. An organization overwhelmed with problems experiences separation between leaves and roots: leaders become out of touch, and staff and members become alienated. The steering committee is like the trunk of a healthy tree, maintaining the flow of energy between the parts.

Let the steering committee prioritize, gather information, and decide who will decide. The steering committee, representative of the whole organization, is in a strategic place to make judgement calls about which problems take priority. It can take an active role in gathering problems and ideas for solution through interviewing, questionnaires, or open discussion. Its meetings can be open to the general membership if it wishes. The steering committee also identifies the most appropriate groups or individuals within the organization to generate options for how to deal with the issues at hand.

Once possible solutions have been generated, the steering group decides who is to decide. Should it be the decision of the director, the board, a particular department or subgroup, or the whole organization? If it is a group decision, the steering committee also decides what decision-making method to use. Another part of the steering committee's work is to keep track of progress. It monitors the status of the problems sent off to be solved: Is the problem-solving unit stuck? Is it time to evaluate a solution that was implemented last year?

These process decisions by the steering committee need at least a minimum of trust by the whole organization, which is why the committee is elected in a representative way. If it does its work well, as bottlenecks are eased and solutions are found the trust level rises.

To keep the trust of the organization, the steering committee must

remember that it is not solving problems for the organization. Instead, it is taking the pulse of the organization and facilitating problem solving. Members of the committee may have good ideas and potential solutions, so they will be tempted to solve problems themselves. Yielding to this temptation turns the committee into a decision-making group, undermines credibility, and complicates lines of accountability and leadership within the organization.

Try rotating the membership of the steering committee after one- or two-year terms, staggering the terms so there is continuity as well as turnover. Rotation builds credibility by giving more people a chance to participate and reduces the temptation to stray from the job of facilitating rather than making decisions.

Use the steering committee for ongoing organizational development. Usually an organization will create a steering committee to deal with an immediate problem. The best time to create a steering committee is when your organization is not in the middle of a crisis, although any time is better than never. Since every organization has problems that need to be attended to, a steering committee can help prevent a buildup as well as dissolve bottlenecks. Having a mechanism through which members can identify problem areas and suggest solutions improves morale and protects against leaks in the raft. You'll find that an ongoing steering committee can assist in many key areas of organizational development:

- Internal organization: Job design, organization of work units, and organizational change
- Human resources: Staff selection processes, performance appraisal design, staff development, and pay, benefit, and incentive plans
- Leadership: Feedback on style and impact of leadership and work climate assessment
- Operations: Policy and procedure development and review, and improvement of organizational communications
- Control: Methods of accountability and monitoring, quality control, process and outcome evaluations, and work task assignment

Don't forget to enjoy the benefits of a well-functioning steering committee. With a well-functioning steering committee there is time to relax. Notice the following concrete benefits to the organization: More and better data. Two-way communication between leaders and staff. Commitment and involvement of members. Improved efficiency and effectiveness. Higher productivity. Fewer grievances and absenteeism. Less tardiness and turnover. A better work climate. Best of all, a better chance to achieve your organization's goals!

Notes

1. Another good source is Marvin R. Weisbord, *Productive Workplaces: Organizing and Managing for Dignity, Meaning and Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).
2. For an in-depth discussion of this, see Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1986), chapter 2.