

Moving People Toward Self-Management

by Todd Alexander

One of the backlashes from all the restructuring and downsizing of the last ten years has been the increase on the workload of most managers. I'm sure there are exceptions, but almost every manager I meet these days is working harder and longer than they were ten years ago. This usually means that they are also enjoying work less. The irony of the situation is that everyone thought that things were supposed to get better as we moved into the age of empowerment. The idea was that we would find new, more effective ways to get things done and that as people took more responsibility they would feel more fulfilled in their jobs. In reality what has happened is that we have overloaded people's job responsibilities and given them no more, and in some cases fewer, resources to handle the increased workload.

The increased workload isn't the managers only burden. Managers also feel that they have less time during the day to actually get work done. This is because of all the additional meetings they are now asked to attend. Not only do these meetings cut into the managers productive time, they can also be an additional source of new tasks and assignments which add to their overflowing workloads. So managers come in early, stay later or work weekends just to keep up with the critical demands.

When I hear managers talk about their increased workloads, the conversation often ends up with the managers blaming upper management for their situation. All it takes is the CEO going on an overseas business trip or a Senior Vice President playing golf at the a charity golf tournament for some managers to look at their own schedules and feel bitter. Those feelings give rise to "Victim" thoughts and behaviors. It's good for us to remember that people who choose to remain victims are people who have chosen to remain powerless. As long as they stay in the victim mode they surrender their power to correct the situation into the hands of someone else.

There is a solution to the situation of overwork but it is one that requires us to look in a different direction. The reality of the situation is that we will not and should not change the job responsibilities of upper management. Their role is to provide strategic vision and leadership, develop opportunities for new business and cultivate good relationships and high visibility to the industry and the community. The solution to our overwork is not for upper management to turn away from their responsibilities so they can dip down and help us do our jobs. I'm sure those of us who have worked in those situations don't care to go back to that approach.

The real solution is to develop a true environment of empowerment that encourages and allows people to move toward self-management. The truth is that many managers found themselves in a situation where upper management increased expectations at the same time they were decreasing resources. This strategy was not a conspiracy to work managers to death. It was upper management acting in a way that was consistent with what they believed the new empowered environment would make possible. Part of the problem was that no one had the guts to tell upper management that the empowered

culture died before it could take root. So now we have upper management pushing ahead while the people below are anchored into their same old way of operating. In the middle, we have the managers who are now being stretched to their absolute limit. Managers are held accountable by upper management for a set of expectations consistent with the new environment while working with employees that are still producing at the level of the old environment.

The challenge for managers is to understand how to set up a true empowered environment and encourage people to become increasingly self-managing. Let me use an illustration to make a few points.

Recently I moved into a new house with lots of wall space. One of the things I wanted to do is have some original artwork to put up on my walls. I have a group of artists I have hired to work as a team to paint paintings for me to put up on my walls. I call my artists together at the staff meeting and deliver my charge: *"I am going out of town for a few days and when I return I want you to have a couple of paintings ready for me to put on my walls. I know you will all do a great job. I'm counting on you not to let me down because next month I have some friends coming over who run the city art museum. I want them to be really impressed. By the way, if I don't like what you come up with, I'm not only going to fire you, I'll make sure you never sell another painting in this city. Good-bye."*

My experience has proven that if I walk out of the room after that speech, I will return from my trip and find one of two things. One option is to return to a group that has done nothing but spend the whole time discussing and trying to guess what I want my paintings to look like. I would bet their discussions ranged from arguments to begin somewhat dispassionate and there would be a significant number of divisions in the group. Some may have even quit and gone on to find other jobs. The other option is to return to a group that has done a painting or two but they are in total fear about my reaction. The paintings either look like some disjointed mess or some mediocre piece of art. I'm sure it was difficult for them to enjoy their work because they were so worried about what I wanted and what my reaction would be if they were wrong.

If they were a smart group they would have asked me questions after I finished my speech. Questions like: *What style of art do you like?" "What styles do you not like?" "What specific walls did you want to hang the art on?" "What are your other furnishings like?" "Do you have a theme for your home?" etc., etc.* Notice that the questions were not just a good approach at customer service, they were also a means to extract expectations, concerns, dependencies and many other things. It is the knowledge of those things that allows the team to have more freedom as they do the work. It also permits the team to execute with confidence instead of timidity or fear. Without the knowledge the team is severely hindered and possibly even paralyzed.

This is often exactly what I see happening in the workplace. The overloaded manager receives a set of lofty and ambiguous expectations from upper management, and the manager doesn't have the time or want to take the risk to clarify or modify the

expectations with upper management. The expectations then get passed down from the manager to the team. The team is unsure of how to proceed and the manager is too busy or unclear to be of help. The team either stays paralyzed or produces an unsatisfactory result.

There is another common breakdown in this situation which occurs when the team starts asking questions about the task. At first the questions are about the project so they can have the correct context. Then they are about the details so they can understand the expectations. If the team isn't careful they can ask too many questions and get down into the micro-levels of detail.

Here is how that might go in my painting scenario: *"What size painting do you want?" "What kind of painting do you like?" "What things do you want in your landscape?" "Do you want a barn in your landscape?" "How big a barn?" "Do you want animals in the painting?" "What kind of animals?" "How many ducks?" "What kind of ducks?" "How large do you want the ducks?" "Do you want all adult ducks, baby ducks or some combination?" "How old do you want the baby ducks?" etc., etc.*

At some point in the dialogue with the team, I may get frustrated and say, *"Forget it, if I have to dictate everything to you it's easier for me to just paint the picture myself!"*

This is a good illustration of where things break down when we try to move people toward self-management. In our desire to give people authority and responsibility we often give them too much too soon. To be more accurate, we give them too much authority and responsibility without some clear expectations and guidelines. This is often paralyzing and when people do take action in that scenario it rarely produces the results we wanted.

The manager needs to understand that moving people toward self management is a progressive process, rather than an event. Just because we want or need people to begin acting a certain way doesn't ensure that they will. It is our responsibility to set up the environment for them to begin acting in the way that is consistent with our desired outcomes. At IMPAQ, this is what we mean by "creating safety." Sometimes people mistakenly interpret that to mean that we allow people to just stay the way they are. On the contrary, what we are trying to do is eliminate inaction and hold people accountable for acting in a way that is consistent with the outcomes we are trying to produce. Their first actions may not be exactly what we want but it is important that we make it possible for people to make progress toward that desired outcome. Once people take action, we can provide guidance and refine their actions as they go.

Let's go back to my team of artists and put this in practical terms. Before they start on the first painting, I will give them my expectations and the appropriate level of information that will allow them to work on the painting. If possible, I may have them start with a painting that is not as critical. I define for them my tastes and desires and am clear about what I don't want. I let them know the areas where they have some latitude and decision-making power and the areas where I want them to check with me. I tell them how I will

be evaluating their work and the things I will be looking for when I view the painting. If they begin to ask too many micro-level questions, I will reassure them in the areas where they have authority. I must also be careful to set my expectations according to what is realistic, and set up any systems I need to support them in getting to the outcomes. I may have a friend who knows me well come over and check on them in my absence in order to represent me and answer any questions they have.

Before they start on the next painting, we will evaluate the outcome as well as the process. It is important for me to give feedback in order to reinforce what went well and where they were on track as well as the areas where they missed the mark. I must also look at the situation to see where I could have been more clear or complete in my descriptions or instructions. As we turn our attention to discuss the next painting, I am going to intentionally be less specific in the areas where I feel they understand the project and my desires. If questions come up in those areas, I will reinforce my confidence in them, or illustrate a point from the first project where I felt they made the right choices. The goal is for me to move them closer to self-management and further away from dependence upon me as the boss.

Many people made the mistake of thinking that self-management eliminated the need for the boss. In reality it did not eliminate the need; it simply changed the relationships and functions between the boss and the self-managed individual or team. The roll of the boss in a self-managed environment is to provide the team with clear direction and expectations so that they have the freedom to operate. It becomes very difficult for them to operate without direction and expectations.

Once we understand the process for moving people toward self-management, we can begin to create an environment that accomplishes the best of what empowerment was supposed to do. If managers ever hope to dig their way out from under their growing workloads, they must understand the process of creating that type of environment. It may take some time, and it definitely takes some strategic thinking, but in the long run it will produce great results.

Not only that, but it also many allow us to take a day off once in a while.