

Influencing Up...or Going Down?

I know someone that has demonstrated a high level of managerial competence. He had been chucked into a management position that had written job description was vague at best, and the level of training he received was less than what would fill up a thimble. There were times when it seemed almost as if he had found himself smack in the middle of a dynamic known as “set up to fail.” But he used the vagueness of the position responsibilities to his advantage by applying some serious leadership dynamics common sense.

His performance began to be recognised by his boss, however not with advancements in position or financial compensation. The recognition came in the form of additional challenges and responsibilities. I have known many managers over the years, and the vast majority of them, if faced with this type of environment, probably would have simply walked a way. But this manager was different. He focussed on building his team through alignment and direct support for their efforts. Over time (a relatively short period of time), he and his team began to hit and exceed their targets. One might think that this would have demonstrated to his boss that his level of managerial competence warranted a better position, or a rise in salary, or even just a better title as recognition. One might think that, but what he received was still more challenges by the boss.

This is a good place to stop and think about what the manager's options were.

1. He could simply say enough is enough and if nothing changes, he would walk. Clearly that is an option but it is an option that would not really accomplish too much at this point. Yes, he would be able to get out of the swirling dynamic that seemed to be the best descriptor of his place in the company, but he might find himself in a similar situation with a new position in a different company. A good risk-benefit analysis would not look too great for this option.
2. He could march into his boss' office and say something to the effect that either he receives more money and a better title, or he will walk. The risk-benefit of this option isn't all that great either. If his boss hasn't been forthcoming so far, it is a safe bet that for one reason or another, the money and position thing is problematic due to either

implicit or explicit company policies, which means that playing hardball isn't going to end well.

3. He could continue to do what he was doing with the hope that something one day would change and he would be recognised for all the contributions he has been making. This has a seriously bad risk-benefit analysis as it looks pretty much like Dorothy, standing in a field clicking her ruby slippers together hoping and hoping and hoping.
4. He could demonstrate the value he brings by doing more in ways that are not simply part of his job description. The vagueness of the current job description can work in his favour for doing this, largely because the targets he had been told were his responsibility were directly interconnected to both the short and long-term viability of the organisation. By surfacing the interconnectedness of the targets and short and long-term organisational viability in meetings would do several things. First, it would demonstrate his competence in seeing and understanding the impact of efforts on strategy success. Second, it would send the signal that he is committed to the organisation long-term for the same reason. Third, it could expand the conversation to include variables that are currently negatively impacting growth sustainability because they are undiscussables. A risk-benefit analysis would show this to be the least risky but the most beneficial to both the manager and the company.

In my many conversations with this manager, several things impressed me. He was very committed to doing the right things, for the right reasons, at the right times. What was equally impressive was the reality that *he is the one* who had identified his options, and *he is the one* to have elected to go for option 4.

Clearly, the manager does have multiple options. The good news is that the manager has thought his options through and explored the potential unintended consequences for each option before making a decision. The bad news is that the manager's boss seems to be pretty clueless about how to support and retain high performing managers. It is a pity that he doesn't seem to be considering the unintended consequences of *his* actions.

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