Micromanaging to Failure

By Justin Locke
May 29, 2012

Advisor Perspectives welcomes guest contributions. The views presented here do not necessarily represent those of Advisor Perspectives.

During my time as bass player with the Boston Pops, our renowned conductor, Arthur Fiedler, constantly pushed us to the limit of what was musically possible. It didn't work 100% of the time, but his faith in our ability as an orchestra more often than not produced exceptional results. By contrast, when a guest conductor tried to dictate every detail of a performance, the results were miserable.

Back when I was a teenager, I played in lots of student bands and orchestras, where I quickly got used to the notion of conductors who function a lot like classroom teachers. Their word was law; you did not argue with them. They had total authority, and those of us in these ensembles prided ourselves on our complete, eager obedience to the leader.

When I took the leap to playing in a major orchestra, I braced myself to be even more exactingly obedient, as all my training to date had taught me to expect. I was ready for the conductors to instruct me with agonizing detail. I envisioned clipboard-toting compliance people standing on either side of me, making sure I played all my notes precisely.

I could not have been more wrong.

When I started playing in the Boston Pops, I went from the command-and-control culture of student orchestras to something wholly unfamiliar – a "total trust" management paradigm.

On my first day at the Pops, we had four-and-a-half hours to rehearse 10 hours of symphonic repertoire.

Impossible, you say? I certainly thought so, given that most student orchestras rehearse for months to do a single concert. But in that major-orchestra environment, management assumed that we knew how to do what needed to be done, and that was all that was said.

Amazingly, that managerial leap of faith proved justified. In the brief rehearsal, we played the first and last eight bars of each movement, and we were trusted to take care of the rest

on our own. I was instantly converted from feeling like a passive pawn to being completely responsible.

This culture of trust was not limited to onstage performance. When we packed our instruments for a tour to Japan, no one checked to make sure we had done so correctly. Once the security guard at the stage door knew your face, you had 24-hour access to the building, in which there were millions of dollars worth of instruments lying about.

When it came to the conductors, a handful of superstars understood the trust-management model and took full advantage of it. Sadly, many of our up-and-coming and guest conductors defaulted to the "everybody watch me very carefully" command-and-control management model. Here we were, 95 people who had devoted our lives to the worship of classical music, but these conductors got it in their heads that we were not terribly interested in doing a good job. They assumed we were a bunch of goof offs who would make trouble and play wrong notes if we weren't carefully guarded. In rehearsals, that's exactly what we became. (In the show, we just ignored them and did it right.)

The overall achievement of your organization is directly limited by how much trust you put in your staff. In a command-and-control environment, in order to be properly obedient, employees have to switch off their brains. They simply cannot be 100% rabidly engaged in doing their task; it is an unavoidable effect of telling them things must be done the way management thinks is best.

For the beginning manager, it's easy to fall into command-and-control mode. Having power is delicious. But, if you always presume that people will be incompetent, lazy, or uninspired unless you somehow actively counteract those characteristics, even on the best days all you will have is a group of individuals who are well-coached in going through whatever motions you've prescribed for them. A good manager aims higher, seeking employees who, liberated to apply their talents, feed off one another in unexpected ways.

The very top conductors were all experts at stoking such flames. They understood that placing the utmost trust in musicians was the only way to tap the extremes of their potential. This required taking a risk on their part. But command-and-control also came with the risk, or perhaps even with a guarantee, that the end product would be second-rate.

Trust in management requires a lot of knowledge. You have to figure out who you can trust, what you can trust them with, and how far can you trust them. And, more than that, it requires faith and courage, which is what makes it so hard. But it's better to live with the occasional screw-up than to live in the state of constant mediocrity and passive disengagement that the command-and-control management model guarantees.

1

Justin Locke spent 18 years playing bass with the Boston Pops before becoming an author and speaker. In his presentations he talks about the confluence of education, history, and the performing arts, and how this affects current issues of organizational dynamics and management. His books include "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (his humorous Pops memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity" (or, the benefits of going against conventional wisdom). To find out more about how he can help you and your organization, visit his website at: www.justinlocke.com.

www.advisorperspectives.com

For a free subscription to the Advisor Perspectives newsletter, visit:
http://www.advisorperspectives.com/subscribers/subscribe.php