

Old School vs. New School Authority: Making the Case for Participation, Collaboration, and Teamwork

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TODAY'S SENIOR MANAGERS do a poor job of understanding and using authority. Although they're responsible for all operating areas of their organizations, they often fail to provide strong focus, structure, and direction: the three hallmarks of true authority.

Traditionally, authority was linked to a more punitive, dictatorial management style that focused on carrying a big stick and getting things done through others. Too often, this "I say, you do" mentality created feelings of anger and led to increased anxiety, rejection, fear, and lack of commitment among team members.

These so-called "old school" senior managers were typically fiercely independent, over confident, and highly competitive. Although they were usually bright and creative, they also tended to be impulsive, stubborn, and argumentative.

The problem with old school authority figures

This personality profile often fueled an independent nature. At younger ages, these senior managers rejected authority, resented being told what to do, and bucked the system; they liked flying by the seat of their pants. Their perspective was, "Well, I didn't need direction when I was coming up. I figured it out myself, so why can't others?" Consequently, they let reporting relationships function too independently, providing little in the way of guidance.

In the past, senior managers often hired individuals with the wrong skill sets to manage authority effectively. Most professional help wanted ads, for instance, usually include phrases such as: "independent self-starter", "fast-track, high-energy strategic thinker", and "highly competitive, goal-oriented, quick decision maker". Unfortunately, these ads ignore a critical aspect of authority—providing direction.

It's no surprise, then, that many old school senior managers did a poor job directing teams, citing these obstacles:

- lack of time
- impatience
- lack of confidence
- lack of dominance
- poor interpersonal skills
- inability to manage conflict

Unfortunately, when senior managers fail to understand authority, they're unable to provide concrete focus, structure, and direction. And then the entire organization suffers, through diminished potential, missed opportunities, and poor judgment. Teams flounder, opening the doors to bad decisions and costly errors.

The benefits of new school authority

It's time to move from the old paradigm of authority to a new one that fosters participation, collaboration, and teamwork. Why? Because senior managers who truly understand the proper use of authority can:

- build teams by encouraging group interaction, the exchange of ideas, and effective decision making
- create a nurturing, supportive environment where individuals can ask tough questions, seek clarification, challenge each other, understand issues, and solve problems
- demonstrate solid social skills and good will, enabling teammates to take risks and contribute to greater results
- act as coaches and mentors who provide constructive feedback
- hold others accountable by setting clear, concise business objectives; providing open, honest feedback; giving rewards as necessary; and administering discipline as needed
- establish concrete business goals and create a measurable plan to achieve them

As the goals of leadership include results, and creating a productive environment, the true leader will be well served by casting off counter-productive old school authority.

About the author

Rick Giombetti, founder of Performance Dynamics Institute of Leadership, has helped 400 companies worldwide build high performance organizations through high performance people. Giombetti Associates (www.GiombettiAssoc.com) is a sponsor of the UMass Family Business Center. ■



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