



WE'RE ALL CONNECTED AND NOBODY IS IN CHARGE

John Shook

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“We’re all connected and nobody is in charge.” –Thomas Friedman

Friedman was describing the global “flat” economy, how money along with goods and resources can and do flow from anywhere to anywhere. But, his phrase is also a good descriptor of how things [work](#) – or don’t – in today’s companies.

Everyone hates the “matrix”. Not the movie series, of course, but the cross-functional matrix organization. Yet, having searched for the past 15 years, I have yet to find an organization of any complexity that does not need to achieve its most important outcomes through cross-functional collaboration.

The problem of managing large or medium-sized organizations can be stated simply (though it rarely is): One person – at the top of a pyramid – can’t tell 1000 (or 100 or 10,000) people what to do when. Yet, equally true, no organization can simply let those 1000 people do what they want when they want. From that simple conundrum comes virtually all complex organization and management theory. Beginning with our friend Fayol [from last week’s column](#).

The shift from an “authority-based” to a “responsibility-based” (characterized by what I often call “pull-based authority”) organization is a key underlying dynamic of the lean organization that can resolve that conundrum. The fact of organizations being cross-functional in [operation](#) while being functional in structure results in a matrix which typically leaves ownership unclear, decision-making stymied, and everyone frustrated. Leadership and the management system need to facilitate a shift from debate about who owns what (authority) to a dialogue around what is the right thing to do.

That’s why Toyota managers would avoid relying on their authority to instruct others, striving whenever possible to lead by influence and example rather than simple command. As one of my bosses in Japan told me, “Avoid telling your staff exactly what to do. Whenever you do that, you take responsibility away from them.” However, while good Toyota managers would rarely tell their people exactly what to do, it is equally true that they would never say, “I don’t care how you do it.” We see this all the time: “You are empowered. You are ‘empowered’, but you’re on your own. If you are successful, good for you – your bonus will reflect it. If you are not successful – your lack of a bonus will reflect that, too.” Contrast that with the lean manager who says, “I care deeply to hear what you want to do, and how you want to do it.” Avoidance of command and control does not have to mean laissez-faire abandonment.

We are all connected. We lament that no one is in charge and we know that simple command & control doesn’t [work](#). The best illustration I know to resolve this dilemma is found in the example of the Toyota [Chief Engineer](#). But, here’s an example from another world that may surprise you. To quote from the U.S. Marine Leadership manual: “An individual’s responsibility for leadership is not dependent on authority.” Yes, we are connected and for the most part no one is in charge,

even though there are many giving orders. We can shift this if we clarify responsibilities and take leadership to fulfill them creating our own authority as needed.

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Mark Rosenthal January 28, 2009

Agreed. The problem with "the matrix" is not the structure itself, but rather, that *in practice* functions often get siloed, and the horizontal component ends up much weaker than the vertical one.

If there is true "pull based responsibility" and everyone is truly aligned on the health of the value stream, vs their functional KPI's, then the actual organizational structure is less relevant. I have always found functional disconnects traced back to functional objectives from the top - attempting to do "management by measurement" rather than each function striving to truly become a more ideal supplier to the value stream as a whole.

In that light, *sometimes* I think an "enlightened despot" may be called for to get things started, then slowly loosen things up as the organization learns to function differently.

Jon Miller February 10, 2009

Hi John,

As I have shared the insights of your MTL book with others, it has struck me how much language has to do with the way people think. It has been a challenge to replace "owner" and who "owns" a process or function with "person responsible" or "person's responsibility". Perhaps this is because "own" is single-syllable and responsible is a mouthful.

But in a very real way our Western "ownership society" is the antithesis of responsibility. When we "own" something we are free to abandon it, throw it away, to give it up. Being responsible means that you are answerable for the well being and success of what or who you are responsible for. It is a completely different concept, the difference between placing yourself first or placing others first.

A sense of ownership (caring) is still important for people to be motivated, But we should encourage leaders to reflect on the thinking and behaviors that come from the words they choose to use.

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