

At the Boundary: A Leader's Dilemma

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A recent incident brought to mind a common phenomenon among certain leaders. We shall call the phenomenon a difficulty in managing their "boundaries." Boundaries can be external to an organization (e.g., the "boundary" between government regulation and an industry or between competitors in an industry). Internal boundaries occur between levels in an organization and between functions. Boundary management difficulties may take a number of forms including, but not limited to: (a) protecting one's turf is a boundary issue; (b) grabbing or holding onto resources that would be better used elsewhere; or (c) implementing the "best defense is a good offense" attack strategy on another department.

In this case we are focused on how a leader manages the boundary of position. It is an example of what you might call the "Recency Effect" or "Last One In" in which the last one in the door before the decision is made gets his or her way. When this kind of boundary issue is occurring, people in the know are aware that the last person to talk with the leader about an issue will have the most influence on a decision. When this is the case, influencing the decision (boundary) becomes a huge game of "Musical Chairs Decision Making." Each person or group wanting to have their way tries to time their visit to the leader to the time just preceding when the decision is made.

One case we witnessed in a public agency involved the member of a department sending an email to the department manager who had scheduled an off-site planning retreat. In the email this employee accused the manager of mismanaging departmental funds and even suggested that the manager was guilty of unethical if not illegal behavior in how this retreat was being funded.

The manager, unable to resolve the issue in the short time frame available and known for responding to the last person who speaks (or writes, in this case), ended up canceling the retreat. The result was that department's leaders were deprived of what some viewed as an important planning experience because of one employee. This is a boundary management issue.

Another example of where boundary issues often arise is with the leader who does not like conflict. Such leaders will often go to great lengths to avoid conflict with someone or a group. One way to do this is to grant the wishes of or comply with an individual or group who is likely to create conflict for the leader. Often, the more strategic (and insidious) people who report to the leader or peers who deal with the leader will manipulate the leader with situations that represent undesirable conflict. When the leader is faced with potential conflict as a result of making a certain decision, they may take the easy way out.

This often results in a situation which does not contribute to the overall benefit of the organization.

To whom does this happen?

This seems to happen with and to leaders who are very intelligent, who are well liked by subordinates, and who have a very strong and positive people orientation. In addition, these leaders seem to be very open to different ideas and tend to be flexible in their orientation to life and work.

This phenomenon whether conflict avoidance or last-one-in is many times a problem for the organization. The openness to influence or need to avoid conflict often leads to decisions that are less than optimal. Our observation is that the leader does not even seem to be aware that the phenomenon exists. The subordinates, peers, and bosses who play this game have a powerful political tool; those who don't choose to play often find that their ideas and influence are left behind.

What to do?

Our first choice would be to coach the leader to manage his or her boundaries differently. That is, we would like to help the leader recognize when potentially destructive influence is being exerted based on relative position in the queue or when conflict is being threatened or delivered as a way to manipulate an outcome.

This kind of change may not be possible—at least in the short run.

An alternative is to create a staff position that includes boundary management as a key role. Executive and administrative assistants almost always manage their boss's time and space boundaries. Their job is to keep people out whom the boss does not want to be disturbed and to let people in who are wanted or needed. Congressional staffs play the same role with their representatives. In a sense, the boundary manager is a gatekeeper for the leader.

This is neither an easy role to create (many leaders do not understand or will not acknowledge the need for it) nor to fill (not everyone can learn or do the functions that are required). Getting a leader to agree that he or she would benefit from a boundary manager requires some level of self-awareness and willingness to share power. At the same time, helping to manage the leader's boundaries is an easy task to carry out.

The first step in any case is for the leader to become aware of the dynamics going on around him or her. To do this they either need to be highly perceptive or to get the information about what is happening from a trusted colleague or advisor. Once you name the process, you can begin to work on how to deal with it. The ultimate solution or strategy will depend upon (a) the individual leader, (b) the talent available to fill such a role, (c) the nature of the organization, and (d) the extent to which others can and will support the effort.