



A More Perfect Union

Throughout time people have joined together to improve their social, economic, and political condition. In theory, two people possess more potential than one and three more than two. Yet, in practice turning group potential into action has flummoxed the best of humankind.

It is not that we haven't tried. From anarchy to tyranny a plethora of "isms" and "ocracies" are available, including monarchy, fascism, communism, Marxism, socialism, theocracy, republicanism, federalism, confederacy, democracy, capitalism, syndicalism and mobocracy. While typically associated with political or economic environments these theories, or a commixture, are at the root of most human organizations, including yours.

History has found the two ends of this continuum, anarchy and tyranny, undesirable and damaging. Common sense would dictate that the answer to organizing, motivating, and governing groups of people lies somewhere between these two extremes, but where? What is the right balance between centralization and distribution, management and empowerment, or control and freedom?

In 1787 our founding fathers struggled with this issue at the Constitutional Convention. The New Jersey plan proposed sovereign power be divided between a central authority and constituent states that retain residual powers. The Virginia plan proposed creating a strong national government. Hamilton's plan proposed to return to a British-like government ... "something not very remote from that which they have lately quitted." The founding fathers had to find a compromise that was right for our nation.

Whether your organization is large or small, public or private, and whether you are an owner, manager, or employee you too must come to some compromise on how it will be governed. Those decisions will make the difference between success and failure. What can you do to favor success?

Let's look at my favorite pet peeve: cars at a traffic light. Assume that the average car is fifteen feet long, each spaced three feet apart, each traveling

an average speed of ten miles per hour, and an average green light of fifteen seconds plus five more seconds for the yellow light. A simple time-distance equation would tell you that sixteen cars can go through the intersection before the red light turns on. In real life you are lucky if ten make it. Why?

Drivers at a traffic light, like many organizations, lack leadership, communication and motivation.

LEADERSHIP: Many organizations identify project leaders but have no one to lead their projects. I'll leave all the intricate details of effective leadership to the specialist and just offer one simple but effective piece of advice: Show up! I'm amazed at how many managers insulate themselves from actual work and employees. Managers are hired to direct and motivate employees. That's hard to do when locked up in an office or a string of endless meetings.

When nominated for the presidency of the Constitutional Convention, George Washington was despondent over the loss of a brother, suffering from rheumatism, absorbed in the management of Mount Vernon, and had serious doubts about the convention. Yet he made the trip and accepted the nomination. For many of the delegates assembled, the general's mere presence gave an air of importance and legitimacy to the convention. The least a leader can do is become involved, walk the floor, or cubicles as it may be, and lend a sense of importance and legitimacy to employees and their projects.

COMMUNICATION: The next time you are waiting at a traffic light count how many seconds expire between the green light and your car's actual movement. The farther back you are the longer the time. The majority of this lag is due to the lack of communication. If the importance to get several cars through the intersection was well known and each driver was in communication with the other drivers, three or four more cars would easily get through the intersection. It works with Air Force Thunderbirds, why not with Ford Thunderbirds?

Of course your organizational goals are clear, and communication between

team players precise, right? What kind of communication dominates your project? In my experience, most managers are promoted because of their ingenuity and skill and think those same attributes will lead to successful management.

Naturally they try to solve all the problems and dole out the answers. Managers need to be less ingenious and more ingenuous. Drop the "i" and add the "u." Managers no longer develop solutions; they guide and support those who do.

When delegates decided to hold the Constitutional Convention in secret, Thomas Jefferson lamented in a letter to John Adams, "I'm sorry they began their deliberations by so abominable a precedent as that of tying up the tongues of their members." To ensure collaboration, be open, straightforward, and sincere with information, sanction, and direction.

MOTIVATION: A final reason for poor traffic light throughput is the fact that most drivers couldn't care less how many cars get through the intersection. Motivating groups to work well together to achieve a common goal, while critical, can be counterintuitive. Most people are motivated when you give them control over their work, yet giving up control leaves managers feeling undisciplined and vulnerable.

Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, offers his insight into the skill of motivation, "I try never to forget that the conductor is silent and the music is made by the players. The conductor's job is to awaken possibility in others. My only power is that which comes from making others powerful."

While I doubt I'll make a dent in traffic light throughput, I hope owners, managers, and employees will evaluate their responsibility in driving their organization towards a more perfect union.

— Gary Petersen
Shim Enterprise, Inc.