

ONE GOOD IDEA BY WILLIAM A. LEVINSON

Situation Control

Let tasks give orders instead of people

MORE THAN 100 years ago, the Ford Motor Co. proved that the law of the situation—the idea that employees prefer direction from tasks instead of people—can minimize dysfunctional conflicts.¹ Facilitators and anyone in the position of “herding cats” should understand this concept. Even when someone has the formal authority to give orders, gaining employees’ willing cooperation is better achieved through the law of the situation.

The Tuckman model of team development progresses through four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing.² Conflict, which can be constructive or destructive, is an element of the storming phase. Conflict to determine the role of alpha person is generally dysfunctional.

Conflict resolution can take one of five forms: accommodation (one side gives in), avoidance, competition (a win-lose situation), compromise (both sides get less than what they want) and collaboration. Collaboration is the only

approach that consistently delivers win-win outcomes that conform to the law of the situation. After a team moves through the storming phase, it can start performing.

Henry Ford described the law of the situation as follows: “The work and the work alone controls us,” and he added that this made job titles unnecessary.³

His production chief, Charles Sorensen, elaborated on this idea in 1956: “The situation controls, and the true leader is the one who responds immediately and effectively to the situation. And, since a situation is always primary, authority derives from function rather than position. The responsibility is for and not to. Of course, I understand all this better today than I did in 1909.”⁴

Sorensen’s reference to 1909 showed that the Ford organization was actually ahead of Mary Parker Follett—a pioneer in management theory. In her essay, “The Giving of Orders,” she wrote: “My solution is to depersonalize the giving of orders, to

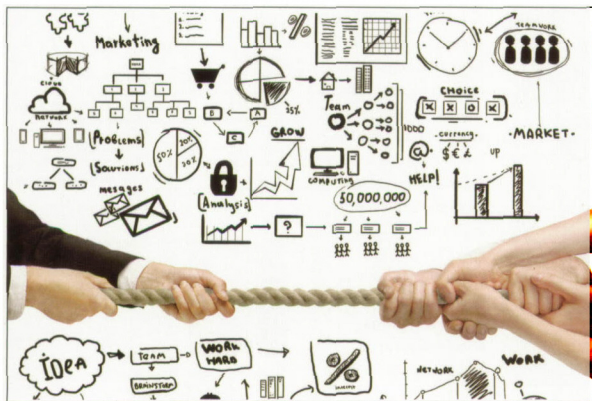
unite all concerned in a study of the situation, to discover the law of the situation, and obey that.”⁵

Today, the U.S. Special Forces, a hierarchical military organization with a chain of command, has adopted this approach: “When the appropriate time comes, the subject matter expert takes the lead and all other members of the team—including the officers and senior noncommissioned officers—become highly cross-trained, supportive team members.”⁶

Even in the armed forces, ranks and organizational positions can become subordinate to the task or situation at hand. When the job gives the orders instead of an individual, personal considerations such as pride and ego cease to be root causes of dysfunctional conflicts. This helps teams perform rather than storm and allows organizations to focus on results. QP

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