

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 22
INTERVENE SKILLFULLY

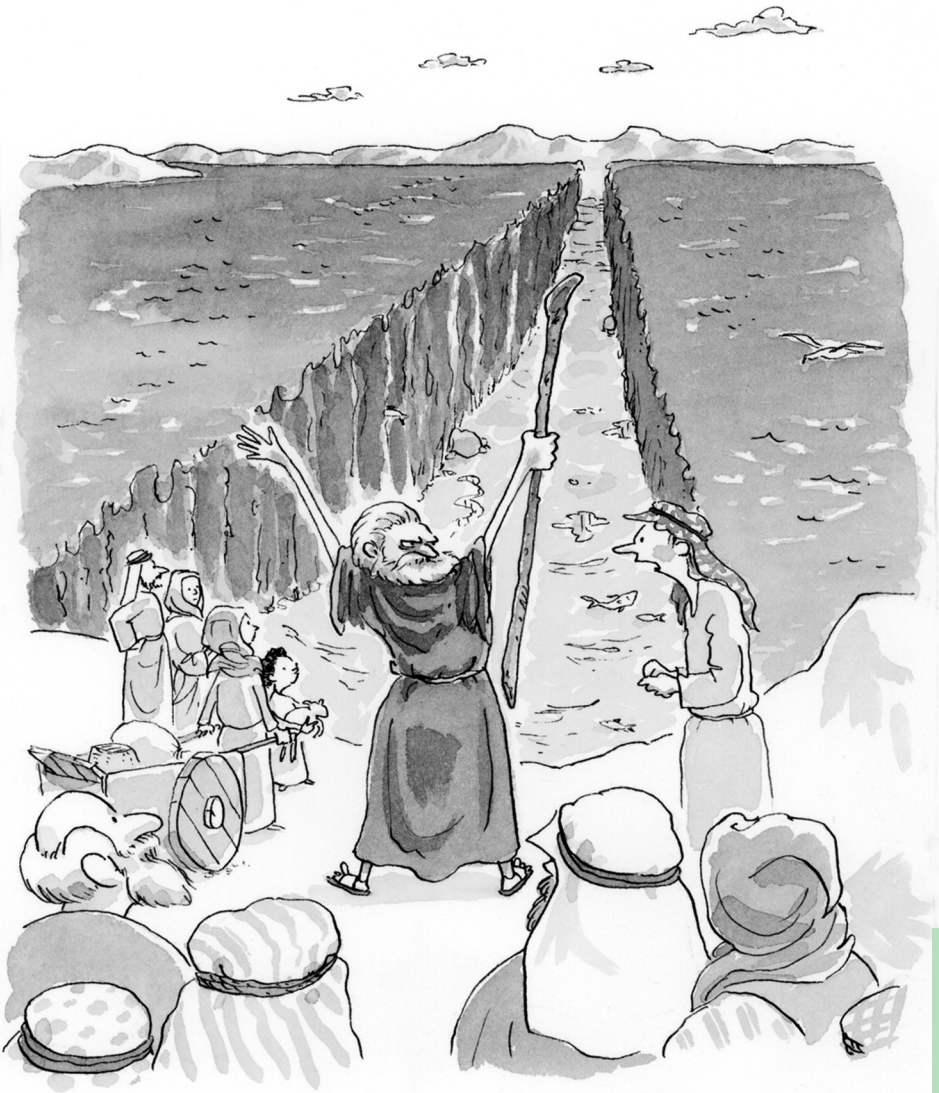
Give the Work Back

All you type-A personalities out there need to pay close attention to this.

Leadership is as much about what you are not doing as what you are doing.

Too many of us, in our quest to solve problems and save the day, assume we are the ones who need to do the work. Maybe we hold the fancy title of CEO or president and assume that, by virtue of our role, we are supposed to step forward to identify the problem and the solution. Or perhaps we don't have an authority role, but we just have a knack for solving tough problems. People naturally turn to us for help. We listen and then we fix. It's what we do. It makes people happy and builds our ego at the same time. Perfect!

And here again is why knowing the difference between adaptive challenges and technical problems is so crucial. One job of those with authority (formal or informal) is to solve technical problems.



“OKAY, NOW WHAT?”

But adaptive challenges can't be solved, or even fully identified, by authority alone. A CEO or manager can instigate things, can use his or her authority to focus attention and provoke thinking, but eventually the people with the problem must get their hands dirty.

Adaptive challenges require the involvement and commitment of stakeholders. You make that happen by giving the work back.

HERE ARE SOME HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLES.

- ▶ The culture of a university is unproductive. It lacks innovation and collaboration. The university president can hope and wish for culture change but can't automatically make it happen. If it's about the culture, it's about the people themselves needing to change.
- ▶ A community is unhealthy. Obesity and malnutrition are increasing. Depression too. It affects the workforce and economy. A health-oriented organization — the medical society or a philanthropy — can spend its days focusing on the issue, but progress will be made only when residents make different choices about diet, exercise and lifestyle.
- ▶ The biggest concern facing a manufacturing company is the disconnect between plant workers and executives (overalls versus suits). Even when the senior executive and foreman agree on the problem, they can't solve it on their own. Men and women throughout the company actually have to engage and be open to changing relationships with one another.

“Giving the work back” versus “delegating”

Don't confuse this idea with delegation. Both are important, but delegation is an act of authority. Giving the work back is an act of leadership. It's not about spreading the work by assigning tasks. “Giving the work back” is about getting people deeply involved. It is creating the space to allow others to exercise leadership.

Delegation is a transfer of authority. Giving the work back is a sharing of responsibility.

For simplicity's sake, imagine that any adaptive challenge has only three phases.

Phase one is problem identification. What's the issue? What's going on? What's not satisfactory? What's the gap between where we are and where we want to go?

Phase two is solution identification. Of all the things we could do, what should we do? What's the best way to proceed? What will we value most?

Phase three is solution implementation. Who will do what, when and how? When will we report back? How will we stay in communication? How will we keep learning as we try one solution and then another?

Our experience suggests that most people don't “give the work back” until phase three, and then it's little more than delegating to get stuff done or a lame attempt to make it appear that people were involved from the beginning.

It is a leadership behavior to give the work back. And when facing an adaptive challenge, the best time to give the work back is in phases one and two.

GIVING THE WORK BACK IN PHASE ONE AND PHASE TWO LOOKS LIKE THIS.

- Asking lots of questions: When you think about the future of this project, what concerns you the most? What's going to keep us from being successful? What holds us back? What are the hidden issues?
- Convening diverse factions to wrestle with those types of questions.
- Not initially offering solutions if you are in authority. See if solutions emerge.
- Talking less and listening more.
- Asking divergent groups to work together to develop a one-pager that describes the challenges (in phase one) or potential solutions (in phase two).

GIVING THE WORK BACK IN PHASE THREE LOOKS LIKE THIS.

- Continuing to ask questions: What challenges are you facing? Where are we getting the most traction? What has surprised you? What does it mean?
- Convening diverse factions to share learning and making decisions about where to allocate resources.
- Being available for support but not jumping in to save foundering people.
- Celebrating successes, large and small.
- Helping people see failure as progress (We've learned something!).
- Looking for connections and identifying resources that could make the work easier.
- Reminding people to take care of themselves by getting enough rest, good food, exercise and laughter.

WHY MUST YOU GIVE THE WORK BACK?

- Unlike technical problems, adaptive challenges cannot be solved by authority alone.
- Tough challenges demand many perspectives. You can't rely on authority to represent everyone.
- Engaging others encourages those differing views to surface.
- It stimulates commitment and creativity and makes it more likely that a collective vision will emerge.
- It creates buy-in from people authentically engaged in the process.

Our experience suggests that giving the work back is one of the more difficult leadership behaviors. It runs counter to our culture, which says authority figures are responsible for solving tough challenges. Those in authority buy into it (“Yes, I am the one in charge and must save the day!”) and those not in authority collude in it (“It’s not my fault, I’m not in charge!”). Those with authority get a bigger ego. Those without authority avoid responsibility.

WHEN SHOULD YOU GIVE THE WORK BACK?

- When you are the only one working on the adaptive challenge.
- When you feel overwhelmed by the challenge.
- When people turn to you for answers instead of taking risks or working with others.
- When there are people who should be engaged who aren't involved yet.
- When others are more qualified to handle the work.





As a company that is quickly growing from a small to medium-sized organization, management is realizing we need to start developing some of our lower-level employees into taking more initiative. How do I relinquish control and delegate some of my work — isn't that giving the work back?

- MUHAMMAD THE MANAGER

Dear Muhammad,

Yours is a clear adaptive challenge, because you can't force them to take more initiative. You can't make the choice for them. They must choose to take more initiative.

Instead of deciding to relinquish control and delegate some of your work, first talk with the employees about the challenges they see related to company growth. Ask them what makes it hard to take initiative in the company. Keep digging. My bet is they could develop ideas and strategies that would lead to more of their colleagues stepping up.

Onward!

