
❖

*THE LEADER AS DECISION-MAKER:
WHEN CENTRALIZED DECISIONS
BECOME IMPERATIVE*

Herbert S. White

My title requires at least some definition. I am not an advocate for authoritative decision-making just for the fun of it, or simply to fuel the manager's ego. Of the four ranges of management styles I identify—authoritative, consultative, participatory, and abdicative—I stress that the most appropriate for any situation is the one that manages least, given the constraints under which the manager is operating, and of course managers always operate under constraints. These include time, money, space, and the expectations of others outside his or her management sphere. In lecturing on this point to my students, I stress that frequently managers make decisions they need not make or should not make, and perhaps as frequently they refuse to make decisions that they alone can make.

Inevitably, I am pressed for examples. I suggest that library directors do not need to decide—indeed it is a decision they can totally abdicate—where to hold the library picnic, or what color to paint the staff lounge, and I am met with howls of protest. Those aren't really important decisions for the staff, I am assured. I can only state that, as they gain management experience, they will learn that these are very important decisions, in terms of staff morale. I think we all know that it is not the big things that destroy the confidence and will of an organization, it is the cumulation of little things. We can understand and accept the reality that there isn't much money for salary increases, even as we wish there were more. By contrast, we get furious at the realization that somebody else is getting the desk near the window, that somebody else is getting to attend that LC committee meeting in Washington, or conversely that I am stuck once again by having to go to Washington. Either negative reaction can occur, and the sensible manager understands that, when selecting someone to go to Washington, or to chair a committee, or even to be a member of a commit-

tee, if possible select someone who thinks this would be an honor, or at least fun. To do this, you have to know your staff as individuals and understand what motivates them. What motivates them is not necessarily what you think ought to motivate them. It is indeed the cumulation of little decisions, and particularly when these are perceived as arbitrary and unreasonable, that tend to destroy the morale of an organization. The manager does not need to pick either the picnic site or the color of the staff lounge. Managerial competence is no stronger in this area than anyone else's. It is of course possible that the decision, once reached democratically, will still cause some unhappiness, but that unhappiness is then directed at a process (I am surrounded by people without taste) and not at the organization itself. If students think that "minor" decisions are not important for staff morale, they will just have to take my word for it until they can discover it for themselves.

My example of an autocratic decision comes with the question of what I might do if the fire alarm bell rang. Would we discuss, and perhaps vote, on whether or not to leave? After all, we know that most library fire alarms are false alarms. No—there would be no discussion. I would tell them to pick up their coats and notebooks and leave the building—now!

I am sure that other speakers will tell you it is desirable to permit the staff to participate in the decision-making process, and I agree. Delegation, that much revered and little practiced concept, is a valuable management tool that we don't employ nearly enough. However, delegation is not abdication, the tactic I suggested in selecting a picnic location. It is not even participation, except in a very narrow and limited sense. The Japanese have far more delegation than we do, but that delegation is specifically focused on the individual's or the group's own job. Japanese workers do not make automotive company policy with regard to whether to open a new U.S. production plant, what prices to charge for cars, or whom to promote to director of the factory. Japanese workers are given a great deal of responsibility (which they translate into freedom), in determining how *they* will do *their* work more effectively to achieve the desired results—greater output, lower cost, fewer errors. They accept this willingly because they understand the contract between the employer and themselves—loyalty returned for loyalty offered. That may change as the Japanese work force is faced with layoffs, but that is an issue for the future. For the present, it should be noted that these Japanese tactics of individual and team empowerment work even, albeit with modifications, for American employees of Japanese corporations. And this is because of one very simple characteristic of delegation—it concentrates on results and not on methods. Being judged by results is something we

generally consider fair, as long as we understand what those expected results are—in advance. The way to deal with this is through specific job descriptions that relate to unit and larger group plans and strategies, and of course these are based on goals and objectives. Individuals must know *why* it has to be of certain quantity, cost, and quality. Understanding this is for them more important than the question of how the decision was made—participatorily or consultatively if possible, authoritatively if necessary. Human beings, unlike robots, need to know WHY. It is a question we begin asking almost as soon as we learn to talk, and it demands an answer.

Once we understand the *why*, the *how* is a territory that individual workers, and teams of workers, cherish as their own domain. Where authoritative managers fail most abysmally is not so much in edicting what should result, but in how it should be accomplished. That “*how*” is usually totally unnecessary, and as the Japanese have found, it can be totally counterproductive. Workers usually know their own jobs better than the boss knows them. If encouraged and rewarded to participate in this process, they will improve quality and quantity, and in doing this also enhance their own morale. It is the classic example of the win-win phenomenon. The problem, I would argue, is not just that managers make too many decisions, it is that they make the wrong decisions. Some of the things they are supposed to decide they often refuse to decide. What is at fault here is the existence of needless rules and needless decisions—what we so fondly call red tape bureaucracy. Whether these needless and intrusive rules were introduced by managers or by a committee matters very little, because the committee process also can lead to intrusive and unnecessary regulations. My concern, in this paper and in my management teaching, is far less with the issue of who makes certain decisions (although I have already expressed my preference for decentralization whenever appropriate) but rather with whether needless decisions are being made, and on whether needed decisions are not being made. Both problems can occur, and they can occur simultaneously in the same organization.

Managers have many roles, but probably the most significant of these can be identified as the need for control and the need for decisions. For the control process, we now have a great deal of help—from computer programs that instantly spot deviations from financial plans and from “helpful” staff organizations, within the library and, most frequently, outside it. I am thinking in particular of the accounting department, which reminds us that we have spent 57% of the funds in only 48% of the time. Control, while obviously an essential part of management, is a process that can, to a large extent, be abdicated to others and even to machines. It is by far the easiest part of management.

However, we get very little help with decisions, and here I would define the managerial role as one of either making decisions or of seeing to it that decisions are made. There are certainly authoritative managers who make decisions that should be left to subordinates, to committees, and to individual workers, or for that matter, there are managers who make decisions that need not be made at all, by anyone. Loren Belker (1978) refers to these as octopus managers, and it is my own sad observation that these individuals may not be trainable, and as in dealing with an octopus, we may have simply to squish them.

Of greater concern to me are managers who refuse to make decisions, and who refuse to see to it that others make decisions. My observation, in libraries but not necessarily exclusively in libraries, is that decision-avoidance managers are far more likely to be found than authoritative and octopus managers. Most specifically, when we reach the level above the library, we find that the nonlibrarians above us who are supposed to make decisions as part of their jobs—university presidents and chancellors, mayors, presidents of library boards, corporate directors of research or of administrative service, principals and superintendents of schools—won't decide at all. We also find managers within libraries who are reluctant to decide what they are supposed to decide or at least to make sure others decide. As we know from management precepts, the absence of a decision is a decision. When I tell you I can't or won't decide whether we will let you attend the next ALA conference, which is now only four weeks away, I send one of several messages, all of which are unhappily received, unless I can also tell you why I can't yet decide and when I will be able to decide. Those messages may include: (1) you are trivial and don't matter to me, or (2) I have no guts, or (3) a combination of both (1) and (2). I think everyone who has been caught in this trap would agree that, at some point, even a negative decision is preferable to a continuation of no decision. Nature abhors a vacuum, and organizations abhor a lack of decisions, a lack of direction, a lack of focus. Managers are responsible for seeing to it that decisions are made—by themselves if necessary—by others if possible. That is, if a decision needs to be made. If no decision needs to be made, then that conclusion that no decision is required, and you can do whatever you want, is in itself also a decision. My concern here is less with fixing percentages on who makes what decisions, but rather with insuring that the process takes place at all. In general, I don't care for authoritative managers, particularly where authoritarianism is not called for. However, not only I but just about everybody else would prefer a predictable authoritarian to someone who is paralyzed by the need to do anything.

Why do individuals avoid making decisions? The answer may be nothing more than a lack of interest, or a lack of awareness that decisions matter, at least for the individual charged with making the decision. That could well apply to nonlibrarians who have responsibility for libraries as part of their domain. We understand that such a situation cannot be acceptable for the library. As Peter Drucker (1986) notes, any subordinate has the right to expect that his or her boss is fascinated with what is done by subordinates, because it is the manager's responsibility to care.

That reason is less likely to apply to library managers. Their reason for failing to react may be a decision paralysis that can relate either to lack of confidence, a fear of offending, or a whole range of other reasons. Unfortunately, decision-avoidance managers have become very good in the process of avoiding decisions. Some of the tactics are a claim of being too busy, which can then in turn lead to a failure to read supplied documentation, or simply a failure to schedule meetings or return telephone calls. It should be noted that a claim of being "too busy" is a selective claim, because it simply means that they are too busy to deal with you. In other words, it is really a lie, although a polite lie. The process of decision avoidance through endless delay by asking for more information even when it is not needed is also well known to those who have suffered from its effects. However, some of the tactics provided by the desire to involve a greater participation, and I would hasten to state that this is an appropriate tactic where applicable, can also serve the decision-avoidance manager. The appointment of committees where no committee is really required is such a tactic, and we should note that those named to pointless committees almost always know what has been done to them. The misuse of the committee process as a dodge against decision-making is so well understood even by the general public that cartoonists are safe in using it. I recall one cartoon of tourists examining a historical marker which proclaims: "On this spot the leaders of all of the world powers convened to face the crises facing the world, and decided to appoint a committee."

It may be useful to reexamine, very briefly, some of the characteristics that define managers and leaders, and particularly the differences between the two. I attempted to do this in one of my own articles (White, 1990) which drew heavily on the work of Tom Cosgrove (1988). Management can be taught, although it requires, in its successful application, a number of characteristics. The most important of these, I would argue, is courage. Because if it is important that managers empower their subordinates, it is at least equally important that they protect them—against unfairness, against unreasonableness, against abuse. There are

some very courageous library managers, but there are also some that are not. I find it discouraging that, in an in-basket exercise I give to some of my students, some respond in the assigned role of director of an academic library to a demand for an apology by a faculty member for the presumed rudeness of a staff member by simply apologizing. Is anything known at this point, even, for example, who it was who was rude? Managers are by necessity pragmatists, but they must also understand their obligation to others, and particularly to the members of their staff. Management is not perceived as fair and predictable. Since we rarely appoint managers because of their perceived stellar qualities as future managers but more likely because of their success as workers, it should not be surprising that some managers lack courage, and that some will dive headlong into a search for compromise and consensus. It should be noted that such senior management writers as Peter Drucker (1986) and Mary Parker Follett (1942) caution against the easy search for agreement and consensus. Drucker notes that when consent appears to be too easily reached, it may simply be because some people don't care, or because others are intimidated. The decision could well turn out to be wrong. And Drucker argues that we should back away from consensus too quickly reached and talk some more. Follett stresses that we should encourage rather than squelch dissent, and Thomas Watson of IBM meant the same thing when he urged his managers to protect the "wild ducks," those whose opinions differed markedly from the majority. They might simply be stupid pests. On the other hand, they might be right.

If it is the job of the manager not just to find, through a variety of techniques, an answer to the problem but also the best answer, the appropriate and inappropriate use of the committee process comes into focus. Managers can be arbitrary and tyrannical, but so can committees in squelching dissent. I have long been worried about the phrase "gets along well with others" as a virtue in the performance evaluation process, because it never seems to add "in the reaching of good decisions."

It is here that the characteristics of managers and leaders can differ. If managers seek a consensus, even if the decision is not necessarily their own (and that may not be bad if the group's is better), leaders are rarely so lacking in confidence. Leaders do not seek consensus, they try to persuade others to accept their view of the world. Positive leaders accomplish great things, but we can't really judge until after the fact, and certainly not all leaders are beneficial. If they were, we would not have had Nazi Germany, Jonestown, or Waco. Leadership as a character trait, I would insist, cannot be willed into existence, and even basketball coaches have learned that the only senior is not necessarily the best team captain.

Sometimes it is a freshman. It is certainly even a bad idea to force unwilling managers to manage, with such exhortations as "sure you can do it, anybody can." It is probably even more mischievous to suggest that anybody can be somehow taught to be a leader. We can perhaps empower leaders, or show them how to be more effective, but the suggestion that anybody can lead (or for that matter manage) simply perpetuates the problems documented for us so handily by Laurence Peter (1969), who noted that, despite all of our good will, personnel selection still seemed to aim at finding for everyone a job they can't do. We do this in large part because we use promotion to management as a reward for work well done in another dimension. Parallel career lattices are still not common in libraries. How many superb reference librarians are able to earn more than the individual who is "merely" the Head of the Reference Department? And yet, what's wrong with that, if the reference librarian makes a greater contribution?

Instinctively, we look for individuals who will both lead and manage us, but in a recent column, Tom Peters (1993) points out this is not all that simple. Leaders deal with large concepts, managers deal with detail. While it is desirable to appoint our leaders as managers, it is also important for these individuals to understand the discipline that this now imposes on them. If leaders seek followers, management authority automatically hands them some, and power can become an aphrodisiac. Peters recalls the observation by Admiral Hyman Rickover, the father of the nuclear submarine and a leader by any standards, that when he moved from conceptualizing this project to having to manage it, he was immediately faced with thousands of annoying little decisions that took up most of his time. Countries that operate under a parliamentary system usually have two designated officials—a prime minister who runs the country and a ceremonial president or monarch who cuts ribbons, graciously receives the championship hog, and welcomes the winning football team. We expect one individual to carry out both the leadership and the ceremonial functions, and it is difficult. Our founding fathers abhorred royalty, but royalty has its management uses in doing what real managers are too busy to do.

On a much less dramatic scale, I can attest to the limitation of freedom I encountered when I served as dean of a library school, or when earlier I had served as president of two national societies. Contrary to what we are shown on television situation comedy programs, management roles are not an enhancer of power, they form barriers and limitations. As dean I understood that when I walked down the hall to the cafeteria, I had to be pleasant to any student, even if I had a toothache. The student, not knowing about my toothache, would assume she was about to be expelled from school if I frowned at her. Similarly, as a dean I also had to

be at least polite to everyone in the administrative hierarchy, because if I made them angry they might punish my school as a way of getting even with me. They shouldn't do that, but they might, and I simply could not take that chance. Now that I have no administrative responsibilities but serve as a tenured faculty member, I can afford to pick fights with anyone I choose and write anything I like. This is a newly found freedom, and I understand the trade-offs between freedom and authority. I am not sure that all charismatic leaders, who may seek managerial status because it conveys prestige and money, necessarily understand what they are giving up, or at least should be giving up. Leaders who seek appointed power as a manipulative tool should of course worry all of us.

What does all of this mean for the management of libraries? I would agree that there are managers who should be more open, more sharing, and at least more consultative if not participatory. In many cases, such a blustering style covers an incompetence and an insecurity, although there are managers who make all the decisions because they think they are smarter than their subordinates. Even when they are right, the price for this management style is too high, because the prophecy becomes self-fulfilling. Managers who treat their subordinates as incompetents will eventually have a staff of incompetents, who are perfectly willing to let the boss make all of the decisions. Individuals with even a modicum of self-respect will have left as soon as they could.

However, while I agree that managers should be as open and democratic as possible, I must again remind you that style is not nearly as important as substance. Are good decisions being made? Committees, I would stress, can be incompetent, and more importantly, can be viciously intolerant of dissent from group consensus. In an article in a recent issue of *Fortune*, Assistant Managing Editor Walter Kiechel (1991) argues that tough times for managers (and there is general consensus that times are tough) do not improve management, they simply strengthen the emphasis that the manager already has as the primary attribute. Good managers get better, but bad managers get worse. More specifically to the point, Kiechel warns against a rapid increase in what he calls "wimp" managers, individuals who see survival as their primary goal. That is, survival for them and not necessarily for the organization that employs them. The musical "How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" has a song that captured that mood completely. It is entitled "No Matter Whom They Fire, I Will Still Be Here." If we measure managers by their rate of success in achieving their objectives, it becomes clear that for success they will have to employ a range of management styles, from the autocratic to the abdicated. If there is a generalization in all of this, it is that good

managers, regardless of the range of styles, must be approachable, fair, predictable, willing to communicate and particularly willing to answer questions and explain. Finally, they must be courageous. If we want to add to that the unique characteristics of a leader—vision, communication skills, and charisma—we must then remember that the leaders who would also be managers must learn self-discipline and must understand and consider the impact on others of what they do. Having good leaders who make good managers is not a simple process.

If management writers such as Drucker and Gifford Pinchot (1985) are correct, the changes that are coming to the management structure may make much of this discussion moot in the long run, although we must remember that management changes made in industry may take a decade to reach libraries, because it isn't just librarians who tend to be conservative but also those who control their direction and tend to like them just the way they are. When we add librarian conservatism to user conservatism to inherent conservatism in the university environment, it may take more than 10 years.

We already see a ruthless weeding, in the corporate sector, of layers of middle managers, and most particularly of those who carry such staff titles as facilitator or coordinator. These individuals, it has been noted, don't really do anything, and perhaps many managers don't, either. If we move, as has been suggested, to self-directed work teams, we will have far fewer managers, and because of that they will not be able to meddle nearly as much. Managers will be responsible for selecting the right people, setting overall goals and objectives, negotiating and defining resources and time scales, and then getting out of the way. I think there is positive news in all of this for us because, unlike a lot of people, librarians really do a lot. It is also at least potentially positive news for those who want to empower individuals to the maximum of their potential and their effort. Because, in this process, at least as I understand it, it is individuals and not just groups whom we will be empowering. Those individuals will undoubtedly form themselves into work teams, probably primarily temporary work teams like task forces, and they will monitor the contribution of their fellow team members far more closely than management ever did. If this turns out to be a true meritocracy, I for one have no problems with it. It will require excellent if fewer managers, and it will both reward and punish on that basis far more effectively than we have ever done. It will do the same thing for individuals in the work force, reward and punish based on achievement. There is risk in this process, as there has always been in a situation which can be subjective, that we not allow biases against individuals and groups who are different

(and perhaps different because they are better) to take hold. We used to label those biases rather blatantly—preconceptions about women, about men, about minority members, about young people, about older people. We hide those biases more carefully now—in terms such as “fits the model of the group” and “acts collegially toward other staff members.” We will have to guard against such labels, because they can be every bit as discriminatory. It doesn’t really matter that you match the others because the others can be told to adjust.

In the future, will successful managers be expected to practice centralized decision-making, consultation, participation, abdication? The answer to all of those is yes. The primary concern is that they had better know why they are doing what they are doing. We should have demanded this all along. Perhaps now we will.

REFERENCES

- Belker, L. B. (1978). *The first-time manager*. New York: American Management Association.
- Cosgrove, T. (1988). Cleaning up our language about leadership. *Campus Activities Programming*, 21(3), 40-45.
- Drucker, P. F. (1986, August 1). How to manage the boss. *Wall Street Journal*, section 1, p. 16.
- Follett, M. P. (1942). *Dynamic administration*. New York: Harper.
- Kiechel, W. (1991, August 12). Dealing with the problem boss. *Fortune*, pp. 97-98.
- Peter, L. J. (1969). *The Peter principle*. New York: Morrow.
- Peters, T. (1993, May 12). Even the most mundane work can become a source of pride. *Bloomington (Indiana) Herald-Times*, (B6).
- Pinchot, G. (1985). *Intrapreneuring: Why you don't have to leave the corporation to become an entrepreneur*. New York: Harper & Row.
- White, H. S. (1990). Managers and leaders: Are there more differences than similarities? *Library Journal*, 115(11), 51-53.