

**THE STREETSAVVY LEADER**  
**GET REAL. GET RESULTS.**

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**Books End...StreetSavvy Leadership Doesn’t**

StreetSavvy Glossary

About the Author



**CALL “CHIPS ON THE BALL”**  
**HOLD OTHERS – AND YOURSELF – ACCOUNTABLE FOR RESULTS**

South Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s was a great place to be a kid.

It was a different (not necessarily simpler) time. There were no after-school programs, no video games, no organized soccer or baseball leagues. I'd ride the bus home from school, grab a snack and head outside to play until my mother called me in for dinner...not with a cell phone, but with her voice. Dinner was on the table between 5:30 and 6:00 because that was when Dad got home from work.

During those weekday afternoons, and especially on the weekends, my friends and I played street games passed down from generations of South Philly kids. We amused ourselves for hours with games like Dead Box, slapball, halfball, stickball and Hit the Penny, to name just a few. (The tradition lives on even though I no longer live in South Philly. My children know how to play halfball and Hit the Quarter – the inflated version of Hit the Penny – and someday soon, my grandkids will too.)

We played a lot of these games with “pimple balls” – white rubber balls about the size of a tennis ball, filled with air and covered with small “pimples.” We didn't have much money, so it was a big deal when one of us bought a pimple ball. Fortunately, between birthdays, holidays and Uncle Tony's cigar box, someone in the group could usually scrounge up 10 cents, and off we'd go to Schwartz's drugstore on Porter Street.

Although pimple balls were highly prized, they often got roofed (stuck on a roof) or lost during the course of a game. That meant the fun was over for everyone. And that's precisely why, within seconds of plunking down his two nickels for a pimple ball, the new owner would call out for all to hear, “Chips on the ball!”

In South Philly lingo, “chips on the ball” meant *You lose it, you pay for it!* So, if I called “chips” on a new pimple ball, and during a fierce game of stickball Joe smacked it onto a roof or sent it careening down the gutter, he was on the hook to either buy a new one or

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pay me back. It was pure street accountability. Even as kids, we took personal responsibility for our actions.

Now don't get me wrong. When a ball was lost, there was plenty of discussion about who was at fault – Joe for hitting the ball too hard or Danny for not catching it. But in the end, whether it was an accident or a missed play, the group would have made certain Joe lived up to his commitment to get another ball. He absolutely didn't like it, but we held him accountable nonetheless.

We didn't think much about accountability back then. People simply did what they needed to do. Today, many people do the same and live up to their commitments. But there are more and more people who either never learned personal accountability or view it as unimportant. As a society, we too often let people off the hook and excuse them from living up to their responsibilities and society's standards. It happens in our legal system, in our schools and most definitely in our businesses. I wish I had a buck for every time a leader has asked me, "How can I get my people to do their job?" In my opinion, **lack of accountability is one of the top (if not *the* top) leadership problems in business today.**

What exactly does *accountability* mean? The etymology, or origins, of the word date back to Ancient Greece. When a person borrowed money from a merchant he was then held responsible *to their account*. Hence, the standard dictionary definition is: "the state of being called to account; liable; answerable." I like WordReference.com's definition: "responsibility to someone or for some activity." But the meaning of the word has evolved over time. A more common notion today is that accountability is "less something one is held to and instead reflects personal choice and willingness to contribute to an outcome." Maybe that's part of the problem.

This contemporary definition is indicative of what I see in many organizations today: people getting by, just doing the minimum, going by the letter of the job rather than the spirit of it. For example: a painter paints a wall but paints over the outlets and switches in the process; an analyst crunches the numbers, but doesn't consider whether they are the right numbers or whether the information is relevant; a cashier acts as if she can't believe a customer had the nerve to interrupt her with a question.

Did the people in these examples do their jobs? Technically, I suppose they did. The painter painted, the analyst analyzed, and the cashier "checked out" (maybe in both senses of the phrase.) But I think we can all agree that none of these people fulfilled the spirit of their jobs.

Call me idealistic, but to me it's pretty simple: accountability is doing the job you were hired to do and doing it to the best of your ability. You either do the job or you don't. Back in Philly, calling chips on the ball was in effect an agreement that everyone would live up to their responsibilities and uphold their end of the bargain. In a business sense, "calling chips on the ball" is the agreement made between an individual and an organization, where both parties agree to live up to their commitments and do their part.

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The organization agrees to pay the individual for successfully completing certain duties and tasks, and the individual agrees to perform those duties and tasks *successfully and completely*, day in and day out.

Consider for a moment an interview situation: You're interviewing a candidate for a job and the session is going well. At the end of the interview, you ask, "If we hire you, will you do this job?" If the candidate were to say, "Well, I'm not sure" or "Sometimes, but not every day," would you hire that person? I hope not. And yet in reality we tolerate those same "responses" on a daily basis from people who already work for us.

So here's the \$64,000 question: If 10-year-old kids playing games can hold each other accountable for results, why can't we? Why are leaders oftentimes hesitant or even embarrassed to ask people to do their jobs? I think there are three interrelated reasons why we don't do a better job of holding ourselves and others accountable:

**1. Unclear, inconsistent and unrealistic expectations.**

A sales manager once lamented to me that his salespeople weren't "connecting enough with prospects and customers." In his mind, they were goofing off, as evidenced by the fact that they routinely left early. I asked him, "What does 'connect enough' mean?"

He said, "You know...enough to keep the pipeline full."

Then I asked, "Well, how full is full enough? How many prospects do you want in the pipeline? How many cold calls and follow-up calls are salespeople required to make each day?"

He just stared at me. He couldn't give me an answer.

You can't hold people accountable to a vague concept or moving target. It would be like calling just "Chips!" Chips on what? The ball? The comic book? The toy? If you don't set, communicate and stick to absolutely crystal-clear terms about what, how, when, where and even why employees are to do their jobs, you're dead in the water.

We live in an instant-gratification culture. We need it, want it, have to have it *now*, and that sets up unrealistic expectations about what can be done and when. Don't set objectives for yourself or your team that you know from the start can't be met or aren't workable because of competing priorities.

Set clear, consistent, realistic expectations. What exactly are the duties and responsibilities of the job? What specifically are the standards to which the job should be done? Precisely when should the project be completed? Who does one answer to?

**2. Doing "the job" has become optional because there are no true consequences for *not* doing it.**

Let's assume for a moment that one of the requirements of your job is to complete a monthly production report by the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the following month. Last month you didn't get the report done on time. You had a good reason: a key employee was out on leave, and you had to cover his job as well as your own. But the truth is that you

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didn't hold yourself accountable. When you finally deliver the report to your manager on the 12<sup>th</sup>, she doesn't say a word about it being late. In fact, she doesn't even look at it for another three days. She didn't take responsibility for holding you accountable either.

What do you think you'll do this month? Will you feel the same urgency and responsibility to get the report done on time? Will anything happen if you let it slide another day or two?

When there are no meaningful consequences for not producing agreed-upon results, eventually standards and requirements lose their meaning and their power. They become arbitrary, even optional. When employees can get away with not helping the customer or doing a poor job on the project, they rightfully conclude that the customer or project isn't that important. (After all, if it were, they would have to answer to someone for why it wasn't done.) As a result, *lack of accountability isn't just tolerated, it's actually "rewarded."* Over time, not holding people accountable for results becomes part of the corporate culture. Obviously it's not overtly stated, but it's part of the culture nonetheless.

Too many leaders don't have the courage to look their employees in the eye and say, "Do your job." Why? *Because too often they feel they don't have any real options if employees don't do their jobs.*

In my father's day, if an employee didn't do his job, he was fired...quickly! When my brother and I were kids, if our mother or father told us to be quiet or go to our rooms, we did it. It never entered our minds not to comply. It simply wasn't an option. But society has changed – with respect to both employment and child rearing. Changes in employment laws were absolutely needed, appropriate and valuable. But perhaps the pendulum has swung so far to the other side that leaders today don't feel they have any choice but to allow poor performance to continue.

If you take steps to hold employees accountable for results, will senior leadership back you up? If an employee fails to produce results and you terminate him or her, will it hold up with the union, with the EEOC, or in court if the company is sued? If you terminate an employee and you can't find a qualified replacement right away, or if a hiring freeze is in effect and you can't get a replacement at all, who's left holding the bag? You! These are the questions that make us pause and wonder if perhaps a warm body doing some of the job is better than no body at all.

**3. Participatory management blurs the lines of accountability.**

Back in the days of authoritarian management, employees were told to "tote the barge," so to speak. And they did it, no questions asked. When the lines of authority are clear, it isn't terribly complicated to hold people to their responsibilities.

But with the rise and popularity of concepts such as participatory management, employee involvement and Six Sigma, the issue of accountability becomes far more complex. It's no longer a matter of simply "toting the barge." Employees want a voice in how they tote the barge, when they will tote the barge, who else should help

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tote the barge and how big the barge should be. Oh, and they want to know why they are toting barges in the first place!

Participatory management increases employee engagement and typically provides better outcomes as well. At the same time, it makes holding people accountable far more challenging. That's just the price you pay. Is it more complicated? Yes. Is it doable? Definitely! (More on exactly how to hold people accountable in the **StreetSavvy Techniques** section at the end of the chapter.)

For the most part, the accountability problem in business today isn't due to a lack of caring. The leaders I know care a great deal. It is true they need some real-world solutions for *how* to hold employees accountable for doing their jobs in a litigation-happy, ever-more-complex environment. But the real issue is that they've come to believe that accountability and responsibility aren't all that important because *their* leaders don't hold *them* accountable.

Accountability is a two-sided issue, up and down the entire chain of command. On the one side, too many individuals don't practice personal accountability, whether intentionally or unknowingly. On the other side, too many leaders don't hold their employees accountable. Please understand, I'm not singling you out. Most of the leaders I work with are facing the same issue. You're not alone. We've all done it. And you know what? It's hard to hold people accountable. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it.

As a leader, practice personal accountability *and* hold your team members accountable for results, whether anyone else in the organization does or not. Why? It's simple...what would happen if every person on your team consistently did his or her job? Would *your* job be easier? Would you be less stressed? Would your spouse and kids like being around you again? Absolutely! Now that's what I call a high YROI!

So really, it's not an issue of *if* you should hold people accountable, it's *how* you do it. In my experience, many leaders mistakenly believe that the way to hold employees accountable for results is through fear, intimidation and, if necessary, punishment. (No wonder many are hesitant to practice accountability!) Fear does work, but it works counter to what this book is all about – smart leadership. Intimidation and punishment are compliance-based methods of accountability that may produce short-term results. Unfortunately, they also irreparably damage trust, commitment and engagement. Insulting or humiliating employees, giving them demeaning assignments, suspending them without pay, and threatening them with termination will definitely get a reaction...just not the kind of reaction you want!

Holding people accountable for doing their jobs doesn't have to be a harsh, unpleasant experience – for them or you. For more than 25 years, I've been coaching leaders on how to effectively use a non-punitive approach to accountability. This simple yet validated approach is based on the concept that effective accountability occurs when people are respected, treated as adults, and coached instead of punished for accountability gaps. (See the **StreetSavvy Techniques** at the end of the chapter for more on this approach.)

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There are plenty of organizations out there who are doing accountability right. The Container Store is a great example. Since its founding in 1978, superior customer service has been a core goal and value of this award-winning retailer. One of the secrets to the company's success is that it holds its customer-service people accountable for the *way* they provide service.

One of my larger clients, an international equipment manufacturer, also stands out when it comes to accountability. Employee engagement is a key piece of their 20-year vision. To ensure that engagement happens, every level of the organization is held accountable. Engagement is measured through annual, worldwide employee-opinion surveys. Executives routinely discuss engagement issues, and leaders' engagement results are a factor in performance appraisals, merit increases, bonuses and succession-planning decisions.

Most of the people on your team are more than willing to be held accountable *if* your expectations are clear, consistent and reasonable, and you treat them with respect. They truly want to know when they have performance or accountability issues, and they want your help in fixing them. So I encourage you to usher in a new day (in an old way.) In fact, I dare you to walk into your next team meeting and say, "Chips on the ball! Let's talk about accountability."

### **How YOU DOIN'?**

- Do you hold yourself accountable for results and for the commitments you make to others?
- Do you hold the people on your team accountable and thereby model this behavior for the rest of the organization?
- Is it possible that you foster a lack of accountability through inadequate performance-review preparation or insufficient coaching?
- When was the last time you checked with your internal customers to find out if they think your department is accountable for its responsibilities?

### **STREETSAVVY TECHNIQUES**

The key to holding people accountable is in the method. So let's put this non-punitive approach to accountability into action:

- STEP 1: Establish crystal-clear, reasonable responsibilities and expectations that people can be held to.** It's neither appropriate nor fair to hold people accountable for generalities such as "Do a good job," "Provide *WOW* customer

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service,” or “Deliver contracting excellence.” How is a team member to know if she has effectively accomplished such a vague task? Perhaps her definition of “excellence” is different than yours.

Numbers, specific timeframes and measurable results provide better direction and allow for true accountability. For example: “Complete the entire report, including the financial analysis, by March 16<sup>th</sup>,” is a definitive statement against which employees can be held accountable. Either they achieve the result or they don’t.

**STEP 2: Build a relationship through day-to-day recognition and coaching.** These two activities create the maximum impact in developing accountability and therefore should represent the bulk of the interactions you have with your employees. Recognition and coaching together send the message that accountability is a priority.

First, consistently recognize those who follow through on their commitments and meet or exceed the expectations you set out in Step 1. What gets recognized and reinforced gets repeated.

Second, when there are gaps between expected and actual results or behavior, positively coach employees for continuous performance-improvement. There are two essential elements of this process:

1. Clearly describe the impact of the individual’s behavior and lack of accountability, especially with respect to the team, the organization and business results.
2. Carefully explain the specific, logical consequences that will occur if the individual doesn’t correct the problem.

For example, Sean is a maintenance person on A shift. Sean hasn’t been completing all of his job duties, primarily, repairing and maintaining production equipment. You’ve determined that Sean’s responsibilities are reasonable – the individuals with the same job on B and C shifts are able to consistently accomplish the assignments – and Sean has told you that he clearly understands his duties.

In a coaching session with him, you might say something like, “Sean, when you don’t finish your repairs, the next shift has to not only complete your work, but also finish their own. In addition, having equipment down for repairs for more than one shift slows down the entire line, making it difficult for your co-workers to meet their production quotas. As you might imagine, that causes them to be frustrated and feel animosity toward you. And finally, your lack of accountability costs the organization money because the line is not working efficiently, and that directly affects your bonus as well as everyone else’s.” (For more details on coaching, see Chapter 16.)

**STEP 3: Take action to address ongoing accountability gaps.** If, after coaching, an employee continues to demonstrate a lack of accountability, move to more

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serious interventions such as formal discipline. Remember that discipline and punishment are two different things. You don't have to scare, intimidate or threaten people into accountability, but you do need to be firm. If you've built a solid relationship with employees and earned their trust, they will feel you have their best interests at heart, even in serious situations.

**STEP 4: Follow up.** Take appropriate action based on the employee's response to coaching or formal discipline. If he adequately addresses his accountability issues, extend congratulations. If, however, the employee doesn't make a positive correction, expand his employment opportunities...outside of your organization. Have the courage to terminate those who refuse to be accountable for their commitments and job responsibilities. This will quickly send the message that you and your organization are serious about accountability.

# 8

## **TAKE A TIP FROM THE BUTCHER SHOP LADIES... USE THE POWER OF INFLUENCE**

I learned about the power of influence at the Butcher Shop.

Supermarkets weren't common in the 50s and 60s, at least not in South Philly. You bought your meat at the Butcher Shop, your milk, eggs and fruit from vendors who came down the street, and the rest of your groceries from the little neighborhood market.

My mom usually went to the Butcher Shop twice a week. It was on 10<sup>th</sup> Street, about a block from our house. When I was young, I'd go with her to pick up pork chops, veal cutlets and braciole. I was amazed by the sheer size of the long, tall refrigerated-counter that stretched from one side of the room to the other. In front of that counter, lined up in an orderly fashion, would be "The Ladies" – other women from the neighborhood who had also come to buy meat. They all dressed similarly – typically a housecoat with brightly colored flowers, no matter the time of year.

As my mom stood in line, I'd press my nose up against the glass counter. I'd stare at the spread of fresh seafood and the peppered slabs of meat, and listen to The Ladies talk, as Italian women tend to do. A lady at the front might tell the woman next to her about her daughter's upcoming wedding, and another woman down the line would chime in with her opinion about the band or the cake at her best friend's cousin's son's wedding.

True to South Philly, the Butcher Shop Ladies weren't afraid to tell it like it was...to tell everyone in the shop, for example, that a certain insurance company downtown would cheat you if you weren't careful. And they certainly weren't afraid to confront the butcher. They watched him like a hawk, making sure he gave them the best piece of meat and that he didn't put his thumb on the scale to add a bit of weight as he calculated the cost.

As a kid, I thought nothing special of the Butcher Shop Ladies. How could I know they wielded such power and influence in our neighborhood?

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Now, my mother, Marion, was a StreetSavvy woman. She was strong-willed and opinionated, and she certainly wasn't afraid to speak her mind. Her friends turned to her for help and advice. She was nobody's fool, and she wasn't about to let anyone take advantage of her. (I can still remember how she handled the egg vendor who came whistling down our street once a week. He knew better than to leave a cracked egg at our house...knew that if he did, my mother would chase him down and make him replace it. I can picture him in my mind – standing there at our front door, a look of concern on his face, as my mother checked the eggs one by one. I'd be willing to bet that he kept a spare egg tucked delicately in his pocket, just in case.)

When I was younger, I believed that all of Mom's opinions and perspectives were solely her own and that no one could tell her anything. She didn't strike me as the type of person who was easily influenced. However, as I got a bit older, I discovered this wasn't always true. I was probably 12 years old when I mustered the courage one day to ask her how she came to the conclusion that Wildwood, New Jersey was the best place for our upcoming family vacation. Preparing my father's lunch pail, she turned to look at me and said, "The ladies at the Butcher Shop," as if all their husbands worked for the local travel agency.

Once that door was opened, she used the phrase often to reveal her source of influence. What I realize now, many years later, is that no woman waiting for a pound of ground beef could ever tell my mother what to do, but they influenced her just the same.

In the same way that the Butcher Shop Ladies influenced my mom, the people and culture of South Philly influenced my values, personality and view of the world. Of course, those with authority – my parents, the police – influenced the way I acted, but there were other influencers that also affected the choices I made. These more subtle influencers included relatives, friends, teachers, TV, books, music, sports and hormones, just to name a few.

Non-authority influencers still shape my life today. The people I respect, the books I read, even my children (when I remember to listen to their developing wisdom) influence my decisions and choices. These influencers have no more authority over me than the Butcher Shop Ladies had over my mother, yet they affect everything I do personally, professionally and socially.

The reality is that each of us – including you – is influenced by people, situations and circumstances, every single day, whether we realize it or not. We hear a lot about the power of influence in politics, religion and social situations, but we don't hear much about the power of influence in business. Instead, it appears to be more in vogue to complain about a lack of authority. I often hear from frustrated managers (at all levels) that they "don't have the authority" to make certain decisions, demand specific behaviors, take disciplinary action, or buy necessary equipment and supplies.

I think these are valid concerns, but I also think there's something else – something deeper – going on. I think leaders are frustrated because they can't force employees to be

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engaged. We can often make employees do the basics of the job, but we can't make them give discretionary effort, nor can we force them to be committed or to have a good attitude.

Authority will get you bare minimum. It won't get you discretionary effort, but *influence* will!

It seems to me that too many leaders completely ignore the power of influence. They don't understand that influence is far more powerful than authority. Why? Because ***authority leads to compliance, whereas influence leads to commitment.*** Authority grabs employees' minds; influence captures their hearts. You can't force employees to be committed or engaged, but you can constantly influence them to be both.

For some situations, such as meeting production or sales quotas, having authority over people to force them to perform at a certain level can lead to better results...*short term.* But in the long run, overused authority in the workplace breeds resentment and disengagement. With today's multigenerational workforce, influence will win over authority every time. Older generations grew up in a more authoritarian culture and environment; therefore they're accustomed to that type of management. Younger generations, however, push back against authority...and they push back hard.

***Influence works with everyone*** regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or position. I'll take influence over authority any day!

Here's something else to think about: Once we allow ourselves and others to say, "I'm helpless because I don't have the authority," it's a slippery, downward slope. If we think we don't have the authority to do something, we won't take responsibility for the results. On the other hand, when we recognize the power of influence, we realize that we can – and must – hold ourselves accountable for results whether we have authority or not.

I can hear you now, saying, "Yeah right! How am I supposed to influence situations over which I have no authority or control?" Great question! Negotiation and mediation expert Linda Swindling says, "Even if you don't have the authority to make a decision, you *always* have the power to influence it." Let's look at the employee-selection process as an example. Although you may not have authority over the process, you can still have a tremendous impact on the selection of a co-worker, a fellow leader or even an upline leader. How? Start by proactively providing the person responsible for recruitment with relevant information about the position, such as job responsibilities, essential personality traits, and specific challenges the new individual may face. In addition, you can offer to assist with the interviewing process so that your input and feedback will be considered in the final decision. It's really no different than the Butcher Shop Ladies influencing my family's vacation plans.

As an executive coach and consultant, influence has been my best tool to get clients to move in a positive direction. I can't force a client to do anything (except maybe pay me by using vague threats about my Uncle Guido who's in the cement business). I've had to

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rely on relationships, respect and a proven track record. Over time, as my credibility has grown with clients, so has my influence. Likewise, I have no authority over you. But hopefully, through candor, sound recommendations and “ah-ha” moments, I can influence you to change some of your beliefs about leadership and help you to implement some different strategies.

As a leader, you must get work done *through* other people. To get results, you must become an influencer. Period. That’s the YROI – influence consistently produces more positive, permanent results than authority, making your job easier.

Like most people, when I was a teenager, I resisted authority. On the other hand, I don’t ever remember resenting being influenced. I did the right thing most of the time anyway, but I was so much more engaged when *I chose* to do what I felt was right for me. You might think that’s just part of being a teenager – that teenagers will always prefer to make their own decisions rather than being dictated to. But I believe that’s true of humans at any age! Your team members will be more engaged when they *choose* to do something because you influenced them rather than told them.

Have I influenced your thinking on this subject without reaching out from the pages and grabbing you by the shirt? I hope so. When someone grabbed your shirt in my old neighborhood, it was usually followed by an aggressive, “You talkin’ to me?!”

When you think about it, it almost doesn’t even matter whether you have the authority to do something or not because *even when you have authority, influence is always the better choice*. Take a tip from the Butcher Shop Ladies and use the power of influence to achieve lasting results.

### **How YOU DOIN’?**

- Who and what affects the decisions and choices you make in life? How many of those influencers have authority or control over you? (My guess is very few other than the government and the IRS.)
- Which do you believe is more powerful – influence or authority? Which do you respond to more positively?
- Would others say you are an influencer or an authoritarian?
- Who or what can you positively influence that you don’t currently have authority over?

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## **STREETSAVVY TECHNIQUES**

1. **Adopt the belief today that you do have influence** and then see how far your influence can go. For example, you may have the authority to send one of your direct reports on a business trip to a regional office. Instead of telling him to pack his bags, discuss the challenges in that particular office and ask how he thinks those issues might best be resolved. Chances are, he will come to the conclusion that he needs to deal with the problem in person. On the other hand, he might offer a solution that's even better. Either way, he'll be much more engaged and committed to the assignment because he came to the conclusion on his own.
2. **Earn the trust and confidence of your team members so they'll be receptive to your influence.** Think about the people who influence you and mimic their positive traits and characteristics. Treat people with respect and empathy. If you build a relationship, people will be open to your advice. And the better you know someone, the more you'll know about how to influence that person.

You can maximize your influence when you genuinely keep others' best interests at heart. Help people see how changing their performance, productivity, attitude, or even their attire will benefit their career and/or personal life. Identify and share what's in it for them.

3. **Use the power of recognition and coaching to increase your influence.** Feedback and coaching are some of the most powerful ways to increase your influence. For example, let's say one of your salespeople doesn't dress appropriately. Reinforce what is considered appropriate by genuinely complimenting her when she wears something acceptable. If you do this consistently, she will eventually accept your constructive criticism on those occasions when she shows up inappropriately dressed.

Both positive reinforcement and constructive criticism send the message to employees that you care and that you will not let them fail or be hurt professionally. Think about it...who has influence over you? People who give you only negative feedback or no feedback at all? Or those who care enough about you to keep you out of trouble while supporting your strengths?

# 14

## **“ROOF IT”...SELECT THE TOP PRIORITIES AND GET RID OF THE REST**

When I visit South Philly these days, I find myself asking, “When did the neighborhood get so small?” As a kid, I never realized what close quarters we lived and played in. Perhaps that was because I was small then. It’s all a matter of perspective, I guess. But the reality of growing up in South Philadelphia was a reality of small spaces – a small house with small rooms; a small kitchen and a small pantry; small streets to drive, park and play on; a small grocery store on the corner; and in some ways, small minds (see Chapter 18 about provincialism!)

Here’s something else interesting: growing up, we never knew we were financially challenged because our parents were too proud and too guarded with that type of information to ever let us know it. We always considered ourselves middle class, but in retrospect, we were probably lower middle-class at best.

At the same time, we clearly understood that it was unacceptable to waste things – especially food – and my parents didn’t spend a lot of money on eating out, fancy vacations or upscale clothing. And you know what? I never missed any of those things. I feel like I had a great childhood.

I will say, however, that all these space and financial limitations meant we had to be efficient and organized. We kept only the essentials, learned to prioritize carefully and were judicious with our spending. Hmm...that seems similar to the mantra of business executives who constantly push for “leaner and meaner” organizations. My mother was the original CFO. She bought only what we needed at the moment and nothing else. And with every meal came the same admonishment: “Only put on your plate what you’re going to eat...and you’d better finish it all!” Sounds to me like just-in-time inventory and “minimize waste.”

Perhaps you think that growing up under these circumstances was depressing or difficult. Actually, it was just the opposite – it was easy. What to wear? There were very few choices...only a couple pair of jeans and a few shirts. What to eat? We had only the grocery store, butcher shop and street vendors to pick from. Where to go? You could go only as far as your legs could carry you. Fewer choices meant greater “productivity” and

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“efficiency,” and it taught me to focus on the essentials – a lesson that has served me well throughout my life.

Most people in today’s business world face the opposite challenge: they have too many choices – too much work, too many “top priorities.” There’s more to do than can possibly be done in a reasonable amount of time. An article in *Fast Company* magazine entitled “Don’t Manage Time, Manage Yourself” by David Beardsley states that the average businessperson has a chronic backlog of 200 to 300 hours of uncompleted work. That’s five to seven *weeks* worth of work! How is a person to catch up?

You can’t.

In addition, in today’s “flatter” organizations, employees and leaders often have conflicting priorities because they serve multiple internal customers and have “dotted-line” accountability to various positions. These people are faced almost daily with the question, “Whose project am I going to do first? Who am I going to keep happy and who am I going to tick off?”

Organizations and leaders expect a great deal from employees, but often don’t do a good enough job of helping them understand the priorities. Which, if you think about it, is a bit ironic. Organizations want to increase profits by producing more with fewer employees, yet inadvertently make it more difficult on employees to increase productivity and achieve better results by not clearly identifying priorities.

Combined, these factors create a tremendous amount of stress. When you constantly feel like you can’t get it all done, coupled with being uncertain about what to focus on first, it’s extremely hard to stay energized and engaged. Stress and safety expert Richard Hawk tells us that chronic stress:

- Impairs focus and attention to detail;
- Reduces productivity;
- Increases disengagement;
- Diminishes quality of work and quality of work life;
- Is one of the leading causes of absenteeism;
- Increases medical claims and insurance costs;
- Is quickly becoming one of the top causes of worker compensation cases.

Something has to give. People need help determining which of the myriad of projects, tasks, deadlines and meetings they’re juggling are most important. “Why do they need help?” you may ask. “Can’t they figure it out on their own?”

We can’t expect employees to effectively prioritize if we don’t give them the necessary information. In many cases, employees don’t have access to the organization’s strategic priorities. As a result, they don’t see the big picture or understand how their work ties to the organization’s key objectives. The funny thing about priorities is that every organization and every team has them (or better have them), and yet frequently, they’re not clear to the very individuals who have to carry them out on a daily basis. I recently

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heard an executive say, “Everything is a priority”...everything except common sense on his part apparently!

One of your roles as a leader is to help set and promote realistic expectations with respect to workload and priorities for your team members. As with so many other issues, you are the middleman – the connection between senior management and your team. Use your knowledge of the organization’s strategic plan to help employees better prioritize their responsibilities.

Author Scott Friedman shares this insight from Jeffrey Miller, President and CEO of Documentum: “There is always too much work to do and not enough time to do it. In order to prevent insanity, frustration and burnout, we need to develop our own pace and then develop laser-like focus on our priorities.”

I agree with Jeffrey, and at the same time, I don’t think he goes far enough. Let me tell you the truth that no one else is likely to tell you: simply reprioritizing is never going to solve the problem. If you want to quickly and permanently increase productivity, you’re going to have to *eliminate* some so-called priorities for your team.

That’s right – you read it right. I said **eliminate**.

As long as you and your team continue to have the same number of tasks, activities and projects on your plate, some things will probably never get done. To prove my point, let me ask you: As a leader, you probably do an effective job of prioritizing, right? How many items are still on your to-do list from last week, last month, *last year*?

That’s what I thought.

If the reality is that you’re not going to get to all of them, then why not get rid of them? You have to ask yourself, if something has been on your to-do list or your team’s priority list for more than a few months and it’s still not done, is it really that important? Apparently you’re operating just fine without the benefits of completing it. Even if it’s a low priority, keeping it on the list day after day after day gives you “agida” (Italian for heartburn) and creates unnecessary pressure for your team.

I also contend that there are likely activities and tasks your team members are doing on a regular basis that are virtually worthless in terms of return. These are often processes that were valuable at one time but are now outdated, meetings that have become unproductive, or reports and analyses are no longer worth the return on the time invested in them.

Perhaps you’re skeptical and think there are no tasks or activities you or your team could eliminate. Let me give you some real-world examples. I know of a company that negotiates literally hundreds of healthcare contracts each year. Their process requires that each potential supplier’s annual report be included with the proposed contract. Insiders tell me that no one ever looks at these reports. Now consider that over the course of a

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year, different people within the company may write as many as 10 contracts with one supplier in 10 different product categories. This means that someone must locate, download and archive the exact same reports, 10 times a year. Multiply that by hundreds of contracts a year and you start to see how much unnecessary work is literally being repeated over and over again. Imagine the time that's being wasted that could be spent on tasks that actually drive results!

Apparently, some inside the company have suggested that they create a central "library" where each supplier's information is kept (and updated once a year) for those who want to review it. But making this kind of a change hasn't been "high on the priority list."

Negotiators in this company spend a tremendous amount of time handling contracts they are 99.99 percent certain will never be awarded, but still have to be negotiated because the supplier responded to a request for proposal. (This requirement is part of the organization's process because they negotiate contracts on behalf of other healthcare companies.) It's a "reality" of their business that wastes not just the negotiators' time, but also the resources of analysts and the legal department. Imagine the productivity that could take place if this organization had the courage to go to its customers and develop a better process.

To be fair, I want to point out that this organization has recently made a change to its procedures that represent a big step in the right direction. Executive committees used to approve all contracts whether they were for \$100 million or \$1 million, rendering these teams far less productive than they could be. (For more on working with teams, see Chapter 10.) Now, contracts under a certain dollar threshold are awarded by lower level committees. The result? Productivity has increased, while the amount of time it takes to get contracts awarded has been reduced.

These are examples from just one organization. I know there are similar situations in your organization too. They exist in virtually every company I've ever dealt with.

When I was a kid in Philly, we used the term "roof it," which meant to lose or get rid of something (forever, in our minds). The neighborhoods were tightly packed with two-story row houses, each with a flat roof. We often accidentally hit balls onto the roofs during stickball or halfball games. Of course, once a ball was "roofed," it was gone and the game was over.

Over time, the roofs of South Philly become a repository for other things we wanted to get rid of. I remember the time I was dating a girl and gave her a ring. When she broke up with me, she gave me the ring back. I was so angry and upset that I roofed the ring – I literally threw it on top of our house. As odd as it may sound, it provided me with a certain sense of closure, and I was able to move on. Years later, a buddy reminded me of that and said, "When you roofed that ring, it was like putting her into oblivion. She was gone."

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I'm calling on leaders at all levels to take a stand, identify top priorities and have the courage to stop unproductive, wasteful activities. In other words, ***select the best and roof the rest!*** Create a more narrow, focused world for your team by helping them zero-in on key priorities and eliminate non-ROI activities. Practice what I call "zero-based prioritizing," a concept that's similar to zero-based budgeting. Periodically (once a year, once a quarter – whatever time period works best for your situation), rethink which projects, activities, tasks and initiatives are truly important in terms of producing results. Ask the very tough question of yourself and of your team, "Are there some things we're doing that we don't have to do or that we can do more efficiently?" Then focus on the high-impact activities and either eliminate or outsource the others.

Will you be able to completely do away with all unproductive tasks? No. It's a lot like turnover. You'll never be able to eradicate it, but you can certainly improve it dramatically. When you select the best and roof the rest, ***every task you eliminate frees up precious time and resources for you and your team to apply toward those activities that directly drive results and profit.*** Keeping people sane, unstressed and productive will give you the biggest bang for your buck.

### **HOW YOU DOIN'?**

- Can you definitively answer the question, "What are my priorities?"
- Can each of your employees definitively answer the question, "What are my priorities?"
- Do your team members understand the big picture and how their work connects to it?
- When you give team members new tasks and projects, do you just pile more on their plate, or do you help them eliminate some existing activities to make room for the new ones?

### **STREETSAVVY TECHNIQUES**

1. **Have the courage to select the best and roof the rest – eliminate unimportant tasks, reports, activities and other busy work.** You probably have the authority to roof some activities your team is responsible for that you determine no longer produce a valid return on investment. However, in some cases, you may have to go up the line. That will require extra courage on your part to go to *your* leader and say, "We simply can't do it all. What do you want us to take off the table?" Remember, what your leader really wants is results. You're guaranteed better results when *your team's priorities are aligned with your leader's priorities.*

If you doubt the importance of a project or task, politely question higher-level people about the true need, value and timing of the activity. Often times, if you appropriately

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raise and push the issue, everyone will come to the realization that perhaps that task isn't such a priority after all.

2. **Develop the habit of asking team members if their priorities are clear.** After all, isn't prioritizing the team's objectives one of your key roles as a leader? Employees are often hesitant to ask leaders for help in clarifying priorities, so you must take the initiative to keep everyone focused on the essentials.
3. **Make it your mission to connect individual priorities to the big picture** – the organization's vision, values, history and purpose. This should be done succinctly and frequently – in meetings, memos, one-on-one sessions – and definitely anytime new work is introduced. Sharing your broader vantage point allows employees to put their work into context. If leaders will consistently connect individual priorities to organizational priorities, over time, employees will be able to more effectively prioritize on their own.