Know When to Back Off and Let Others Shine

Description

Recently I was talking with a friend and we were comparing our experiences. Both of us at one time in our careers had worked with bosses who presented work others had done, without mentioning that fact. I remember working long hours on projects and then providing the work to my boss. He would present to the board and never mention that others had worked on the project and/or provided him everything he was presenting. I would sit along the wall with others during board meetings. The thought was "I wonder if the board ever thinks 'What do those people do?'"

Now, the boss has every right to present as they see fit. However, I feel the boss having to be at every presentation, and consistently presenting others' material as if they have been heavily involved and/or taking credit for that work does not lend itself to building a high-performing organization.

This may be an age or generational item. It could be those who still do things this way learned the practice from their bosses, who learned it from their bosses. Think of the TV series *Mad Men.* Don Draper would have the staff work long hours, then he would swoop in and present the material to the client. At times, the staff who worked on the project were in the room for the presentation and at times they were not. What was common is the people who worked so hard on the project were looking for other jobs!

Of course, there are times when it makes sense for the boss to be at a presentation: sometimes to present and other times to be supportive. However, the more a boss lets others develop and shine the more engaged and satisfied employees will be…and the more time the boss has to move the organization forward. This also demonstrates the potential for the company to grow.

When I started Studer Group in 2000, I touched every client and was the main presenter at every conference. It is not hard to do this when starting with a few clients. I also heard comments that some felt it was not the tools and techniques that created the success, but rather the involvement of me personally. So we tried an experiment. We had a client who had never heard me speak, had never met me, and was still achieving positive results. I made sure I was not involved in any sense with this client. I had to see if the company could grow. If I had to work directly with every client and give every talk, our future was very limited. In the situation I am describing, Don Dean was the coach and St. Alexius Medical Center in Hoffman Estates was the client. Ed Goldberg was the CEO. The results were phenomenal. It demonstrated we could grow the company.

A question I receive weekly from owners is "How do I scale the company?" My answer is "Develop others and make them the stars." Will a few leave? Maybe. However, most will stay and appreciate the opportunity.

It is easy to convince ourselves we must be there. It can be a combination of ego and lack of trust as

well as wanting to be supportive and hear things firsthand. It can be difficult to back off, but that is usually what is needed. Here are a few steps for getting started:

1. Make sure that there are clear expectations with the client. If you know who will be working with the client, include them in the expectations meeting. I recommend the book *What Your Clients Won't Tell You and Your Managers Don't Know*, by John Gamble. It describes expectation meetings. At these meetings, manage up others they may work with. (Managing up is positioning others in a positive light.) It is good to explain that others have more talent than you in the areas they are looking for.

2. Do not accompany the staff to the client work meetings, unless it's to share how they have done the work and how happy you are with them. Make being there the exception, not the rule. You know you are successful when people call others and not you.

3. Put a start-up and feedback system in place. A key to creating a system not dependent on the boss/owner is to hardwire a client system. This starts with an expectation meeting. The Gamble book I just mentioned is a great read on this. This meeting makes sure the desired outcomes are understood. If you know who will be on the account, it's great to have those people in the room. Then have 30-, 90-, and 180-day check-ins where the client gets a call or a survey to answer certain questions. Of course, time frames will vary if it's a short-term project. These check-ins lead to lots of reward for those on the account, make you aware of any needed adjustments, and provide ways to improve processes. I am amazed at how many companies do not do these check-ins.

Leaders who develop others build better companies, have more time to move the company forward, retain more talent, and have the joy of seeing others be successful. This does not mean just hiring people and throwing them out there. It does mean providing opportunities for people to fly solo when they are ready.

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Author
quint-studer