



Who's In Charge?

I'm struck by a re-occurring pattern I've observed in my position as an employer for my two natural food businesses. When I've casually mentioned this pattern to assorted customers or other business owners, I'm

overwhelmed by their vigorous responses. They have urged me to address the issue and since I believe there are more widespread reflections of this topic in general society, let's leap off the cliff!

We'll begin with some stories. Here are two of the most vivid (details changed for privacy):

A few years ago, a young man in his late twenties joined our deli staff at Oak Street Natural Market in Bozeman. He had been in and out of the university like many young people today, and was still unsure of his ultimate life direction. He was eager to learn and was initially a good worker. He became friends with all the staff, took on additional responsibilities, and referred to his fellow workers as "family." He wrote us notes thanking us for providing such a warm and loving work environment. We were especially thanked for "always being there for me and for believing in me."

When the honeymoon period ended, our head chef, the young man's immediate supervisor, noticed an increasing pattern of sick call-ins and physical complaints. His performance level slackened, in addition to his ability to take responsibility for it. We subsequently learned from other employees that

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he had what might be politely called a "problem" with partying too hard in the evenings. When we attempted to address these performance issues in evaluations, we were met with angry rebuttals and accusations.

He eventually voluntarily gave his notice and moved on. We were relieved because we realized he would have had to change or be dismissed. And it was apparent that he had no desire to change.



Flash forward a year or so. I received a note in my mail from this same young man, asking for another opportunity to work. He said he missed the warmth and energy of our store like an old friend. Now, I personally believe that the ability to change is what allows us to face each day, bright in the possibility that we can and will master our past defeats. But I also believe we need clear boundaries and a plan to succeed. So because we did believe in him, we decided to give him another opportunity. When we discussed his conditions

for returning to work, we wrote a series of behavior guidelines and a six-month commitment agreement which he signed.

I wish I could report his victory, but it wasn't to be. About four months into the re-commitment, the old patterns and excuses again surfaced, with the subsequent diminishing of performance and responsibility. He took another job without informing us. This time when she gave his notice, I handed him the signed six-month agreement, which he tore up

and tossed on the ground. He left in anger and resentment that we weren't happy and supportive of his new job, even though he had blatantly failed to keep his word.

OK, don't draw any conclusions yet! Here's the second story:

Earlier this year, we hired an extremely capable young woman for our Livingston store who was just about to turn thirty. Her quest for a professional college degree hadn't worked out. She was trying to figure out her next life move. This woman was one of the best workers we've ever encountered; she was bright, attentive and polite. We were tickled to have her on the team and let her know in many ways.

After a few months, she was scheduled to begin training for a new responsibility. When she arrived for the shift, I was a bit startled when she informed me that she would be leaving early since she had an out-of-town guest. This shift had been scheduled for several weeks and involved end-of-the-day procedures. I suggested a compromise, letting her go right then if she would return for the last hour to train. She said that when she left for the day she didn't want to return, and that I should be more understanding. I let her know that I could not meet her demand and she would have to work her shift.

At this point, she told me that since she was the best worker in the store, which I agreed with, she should be given more latitude. I replied that being good didn't mean she was above the rules and schedules and that all other employees should re-adjust to her wishes. Then she said what has become my favorite line of the year: "Well, this isn't my dream job."

After retorting, "Well, it's not mine either!"

I thought to myself, "How many of us have ever had the luxury of working our dream job? When you were figuring out how to pay your rent, mortgage, grocery, car and utility bills last month, how concerned were you about your dream job?"

When she said she could work circles around every employee, including me, and that she could also manage the business better than me, I knew we had reached the point of no-return. Now here's the similar moment from our first story which intrigues me. When I fired her, the young woman said, "You don't have to go there. I like you. I'd like to spend time with you outside of work, getting to know you." She was completely sincere, as sincere as the man in our first story when he called us his "family."

When I've told these stories and other examples to my peers, both professionally and personally, the discussion eventually comes around to a generational attitude shift that many folks, especially those in positions of authority, are noticing. I believe its roots may lie in the so-called self-esteem movement that found its way into our schools' curricula over the past twenty years. I'm sure you've heard of it. Contests where everyone gets awarded a ribbon, just because everyone tried. Grade devaluation, because no one should ever feel like they failed. Elimination of placements like first, second and third because everyone tried their best.

Couple this with the parenting technique of recent years that allows children to speak and feel equal with adults and you have the perfect storm of the leaderless society à la the novel *Lord of the Flies*, wherein the strongest and cruelest prevail, regardless of the opportunity given to individuals to lead and give example. Bottom line seems to imply, "You



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are not the boss of me! We are in a horizontal relationship whereby we are equal and can be friends. I do not have to take advice or direction from you because we are the same. There is no one above me or below me.”

Another common thread is the inability of some of these young people to accept correction if they are not performing properly. They look at you in amazement and pour out a flood of excuses when you point out their mistakes. Because aren't they already perfect, after all? That's what they've been told all their lives, right?

What both of those young people in my stores failed to accept is that we all have a boss, and we also will be a boss to someone else. And we will be tested in both of these positions. Grace and growth occur in the realization that our present circumstance, whether to lead or be led, is always temporary and for our education. I will never forget the blank look in the eyes of these two young people when I let them know they could no longer be a part of our business. I understood at that moment that they simply did not have any awareness that life is structured on the concept of hierarchy. There is always someone above us and someone below us, either in responsibility or attainment. That is hierarchy and it sustains every aspect of life. You function within hierarchy. You count.

A very wise teacher once said that you need the next person on the rung of the ladder. You need your supervisor or your employer. You may only need that person for a week or a month, but there is a conveyance of consciousness, of talent, of

information, of expertise, of technical know-how. As long as you are in a position of working to attain that level, you are under that individual's higher level of mastery, even if that person may be imperfect, annoying and incomplete, and may have less seemingly outer manifestation of attainment than you do.

Ramifications of this failure to acknowledge hierarchy may have long-term consequences for our society. You can see examples of it working its self-affirming way into immigration amnesty proposals, healthcare issues, and monetary reform.

On a more local level, employers must decide how long to tolerate what amounts to an arrogant attitude in an otherwise good employee. We are constantly weighing the costs of retraining versus allowing the inmates to run the asylum, so to speak. I feel the longer we let this attitude go unaddressed, the harder it will ultimately be for the young person to face what they will inevitably encounter somewhere else in the very near future. It's the dilemma every good parent faces. You know your child will rant and rave when you draw the line, making you the villain of the case. But isn't that what we sign on for as the leader of our household?

You cannot avoid being a leader sometime, somewhere. You could be in a group of people, a group of friends or children anywhere on the planet and find yourself as the one who has the means to solve a problem or to act quickly in an



emergency. You need to settle the equation of the fear of conflict keeping you from being a leader. Leaders always have conflict. If you're going to lead, you will have those who

disagree. So learn to live with the job.

As you honor hierarchy and respect this universal law, opportunities will be open to you for more accountability. The burden of responsibility when one accepts hierarchy is so great that it is one of the aspects that turns people aside, as it did my two young employees. But that is why we have our teachers, those who have gone beyond us on the path of life. They help us to discern Truth—in ourselves first, and then in the world. Without hierarchy, we would not have the measuring rod to define identity.

Those who have worked hard to build their foundation and have abided by the rules should not be forced to hand over the keys to the kingdom to those people demanding their “rights” just because they showed up. There is a due process in all of life's adventures and just because what you are currently doing isn't your dream job, it doesn't follow that you are entitled to skip any of that process, or receive special exceptions.

When the hero in fairy tales was handed the magic lamp or the golden goose without any kind of self-effort, the result was always failure. The only time he achieved his goal was when he had to be sorely tested before reaching the gold, the princess, or the crown. ■