# BACK IN POLAND -- V:
HOW LEADERS SHOULD USE THEIR POWER
John J. Scherer

Next in the series on John's recent work in Poland. In the last regular issue (before the special on the Maasai Experience), he looked at some of the inherent problems in trying to avoid issues of power and authority by creating a 'flat' or an everyone-is-equal organization. Here he addresses an alternative approach, one that moves back and forth on a continuum of shared power and authority based on several key variables.

--The Editor

Last week I described a conversation with a client in Poland, who was looking for some kind of middle path between being (seen as) a dictator and operating 100% by consensus. He was learning from painful experience that neither option really worked for very long.

If we treat this question of where power should be located as 'a polarity to be managed' (a la friend and colleague, Barry Johnson), we see that each leadership type has an up-side and a down-side. Let's re-frame the options in more neutral terms as *top-down* and *bottom-up* decision making. The 'up-side' of top-down (that has a kind of poetic ring to it, doesn't it?) is greater speed and clarity. The boss decides and everybody knows right away. The 'down-side' is the potential for a lack of ownership by others and weaker decisions based on a single mind.
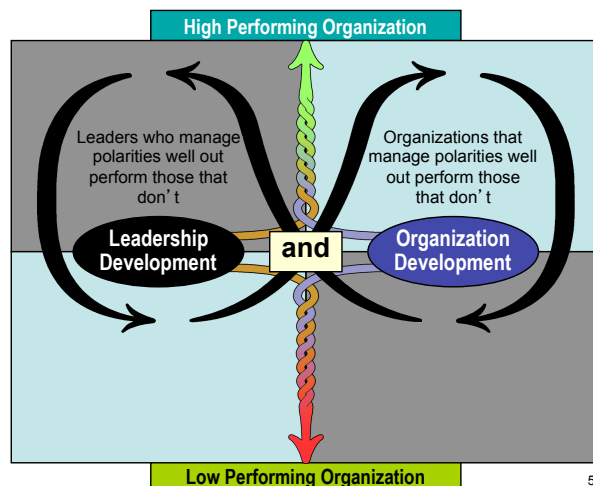
Following Barry's principle, we only need to reverse the left quadrants to ascertain the other (right) quadrants of the polarity equation. The benefits of bottom-up decision-

making are potentially greater ownership and broader (hopefully better) quality decisions. The potential down-sides are slower speed and lack of clarity.

So, which one should a leader use? The answer is 'Yes.'

Who has The Conn?

My four years of military service aboard a US Navy destroyer taught me a lot about this issue. There was at least one four-hour 'watch' every 24 hours when I was Officer of the Deck and 'had the Conn' (which means I was in charge of where the ship went and what we did). If I said, 'Right full rudder!' that was the time for the Helmsman to put the rudder over and repeat the command, 'Right full rudder aye, sir!' It was *not* time for the Helmsman to say, 'Well. . . I'm not so sure. . . What do you guys think? Should I put the rudder over like Mr. Scherer says, or should we talk about it?' In that situation, speed and accountability won out over ownership and thoroughness.

My ship, USS EATON (DD-510) underway, ca 1965

But there were other times, for instance when a piece of electronic gear 'went down' (stopped working), and my team of Electronic Technicians would meet to figure out what to do. In that case, I listened, asked questions, gave input when I thought I had something to add (which was not often), and in the end said, 'OK, what do you recommend we do?' A kind of consensus had usually emerged, and I rarely if ever countermanded what the group decided to do.

So, the answer to the question: Which kind of decision-making is right? is, *It depends.*

Authoritarian, Democratic & Laissez Faire Leaders

In 1938 *(bet you didn't realize this field had been around that long!),* one of my mentors in this work, Ron Lippitt, took part in ground-breaking research into the effects and results of various leadership styles. As a young graduate student of Kurt Lewin (considered the 'Father' of applied behavioral science), Ron and a fellow student, Ralph White, designed a research project that examined the effects of three basic leadership types on three (matched) groups of youth involved in an after-school craft/construction project. The three groups were led by Ron and/or Ralph in one of these styles:

- **Authoritarian** - In directing the group's activities, the leader remained aloof and told the youth what to do (gave them orders) without consultation.
- **Democratic** - The leader offered guidance and encouraged the youth, and participated in the group to some extent, responding respectfully to questions.
- **Laissez-faire** - The leader gave the youth basic information to get them started, but then withdrew, and allowed them to do whatever they wanted.

The groups of youth were as carefully matched as possible for IQ, perceived popularity, energy levels, and they all worked on the same project of making masks, a 'product' that could be counted for *quantity* and assessed for artistic *quality* as well.

The Results

- **In the Authoritarian-led Groups:** Two types of behavior were prominent -- 'aggressive' and 'apathetic'. The aggressive youth in that group became rebellious and demanded attention from the leader, as well as tending to blame other members of the group whenever something went wrong. The apathetic youth did little, placed fewer demands on the leader and were less critical of him. When, as part of the research, they were given a non-authoritarian leader, they tended to fool around and engage in horseplay. The Authoritarian Groups were higher in *quantitative* productivity than the 'Democratic' groups, but the quality of their masks was not rated as great.
- **In the Democratic-led Groups:** Morale was rated as high, and relationships between the group members, as well as with the group leader, were friendly. When the group leader left the room, the group was capable of working

independently. The group showed creativity and originality, and, although they produced fewer masks than the Authoritarian group, the quality of their productions was rated higher.

- **In the Laissez-faire-led Groups:** These were the worst groups of all by every measure. They did not produce as many masks as the other groups and those they did produce were of poor quality. Their group satisfaction was the lowest, they co-operated with each other very little, and placed great demands on the leader, showing little ability to work independently. They waited for him to tell them what to do and, when he didn't, they became confused and, as the observers noted, 'dawdled.'

What They Each Look Like

1. Autocratic (Directive) Leaders:

- Centralize authority in themselves or a small group of trusted others
- Dictate work methods and manage quality control themselves (tell them what to do and how well they did)
- Make unilateral decisions and announce them (e.g. 'Right full rudder!')
- Limit participation and involvement of team members

2. Democratic (Participative) Leaders:

- Involve employees in decision-making and quality control (They ask, 'How did we do?')
- Delegate authority (now called 'empowerment') as far down and out as possible
- Encourage participation in deciding work methods and goals
- Use feedback as opportunity to coach team members—and themselves

3. Laissez-Faire Leaders:

- Join the group as a member with no special influence
- Give team members complete freedom to make decisions and complete their work anyway they see fit with no accountability or feedback

- Provide materials and answers questions that are asked
- Do not initiate anything; they wait for team members to act

A critical reader may think of reasons not to take this research seriously today. First, it was carried out almost 60 years ago, and a lot has changed since then. Second, it was with youth, not adults. And finally, the researchers, Lewin, Lippitt and White, went in with a bias toward the democratic style. It was, in fact, why Lewin left Germany to come to America in the mid-thirties: to learn more about democratic leadership. So, you could dismiss the results if you want.
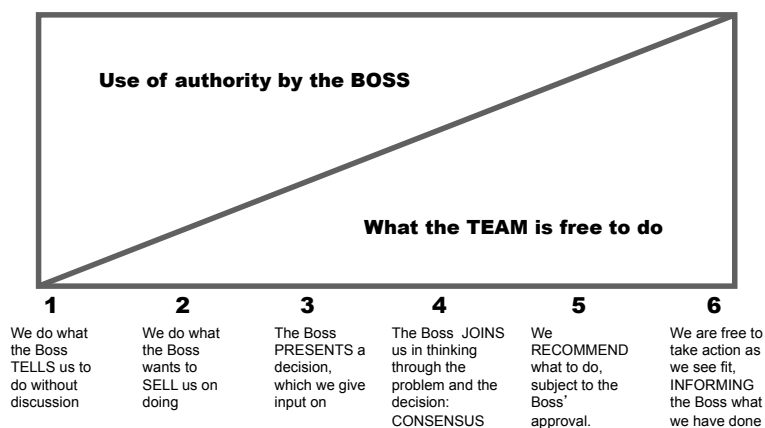
But I have seen similar things occurring in *most* of the real-world organizations I have consulted with over the years. Done well (and that's a big statement), democratic-leadership tends to do better in both quantity and quality of results. A key variable, however, seems to be in not only how well the democratic style is carried out, but *when*.

Putting it Together: Tannenbaum & Schmidt

Thirty years later, a 1958 HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW article by two applied behavioral scientists, Tannenbaum and Schmidt, took the Lewin, Lippitt and White study a bit further, creating a graphic of a continuum showing various degrees of power-sharing between a boss and a team. For more, see www.businessballs.com/tannenbaum.htm

The Empowerment Continuum

Use of authority by the BOSS

What the TEAM is free to do

1	2	3	4	5	6
We do what the Boss TELLS us to do without discussion	We do what the Boss wants to SELL us on doing	The Boss PRESENTS a decision, which we give input on	The Boss JOINS us in thinking through the problem and the decision: CONSENSUS	We RECOMMEND what to do, subject to the Boss' approval.	We are free to take action as we see fit, INFORMING the Boss what we have done

Adapted from Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1953.

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As you can see in my adaptation of their model, there are six power-sharing options available to a boss and a team, all valid and potentially effective—depending on certain variables, such as time pressure, skill distribution, and the need for ownership. When time is tight and the boss has enough information and/or expertise, and psychological ownership by the team is not needed, then #1 works fine. At the other end of the spectrum, when time is not an issue, and psychological ownership *is* important, and the *team* has the expertise needed—and the boss' input is not required, then #6 works well.

NB: The Leader is Always the Leader (This paragraph from www.businessballs.com .)

'Regardless of the amount of responsibility and freedom delegated by a manager to a team, the manager retains accountability for any catastrophic problems that result. Delegating freedom and decision-making responsibility to a team absolutely does not absolve the manager of accountability. That's why delegating, whether to teams or individuals, requires a very grown-up manager. If everything goes well, the team must get the credit; if it all goes horribly wrong, the manager must take the blame. This is entirely fair, because the manager is ultimately responsible for judging the seriousness of any given situation -- including the risks entailed -- and the level of freedom that can safely be granted to the team to deal with it. This is not actually part of the Tannebaum and Schmidt Continuum, but it's vital to apply this philosophy or the model will definitely be weakened, or at worse completely backfire.'

This is what my Polish client was wrestling with. A leader can even feel a little bi-polar about the whole thing. As another executive client put it: 'I let the team make decisions until things get muddy, then I take over and make decisions on my own until the team rebels. Then I back off, give away my power and decision-making, and act like every other member of the team. It's a @#$%&%# mess.'

Many parents know this one, too: *swinging back and forth between letting the kids do what they want until they can't stand the kids, then they taking over autocratically until they can't stand themselves.*

Leaders need to see that there are *many* power-sharing options available between the two extremes of telling and letting go—but no options regarding *responsibility*. That can't be delegated on a regular basis, even to a great team.

Like muscles in need of exercise, the power-sharing options in the middle of the Tannenbaum & Schmidt continuum must be practiced consciously. Try it this week. Run your own experiment: Look for places to use a *blend* of your power and authority with that of your team/family and see what happens.

--John J. Scherer