

Who Should Decide

How to Get the Best Decisions throughout the Library

Robert F. Moran Jr.

ACTING COMMANDER SPOCK

Ensign, plot a course to rendezvous with the fleet; there is nothing more we can do for Vulcan.

ACTING LIEUTENANT KIRK

No! We have to pursue the Romulan ship. Joining the fleet will do nothing!

SPOCK

Captain Pike's orders were to join the fleet as soon as you and your team was retrieved.

KIRK

No! By the time we can get to the fleet, Nero will have arrived at Earth and Earth will suffer the same devastation Vulcan received.

SPOCK

Orders are orders, we must do as the Captain said.

The confrontation between SPOCK and KIRK escalates resulting in a physical confrontation and then SPOCK's decision to relinquish command to KIRK.

Immediately, KIRK commands: Ensign Sulu, plot a course to overtake Nero's ship. Scotty, give us all the warp this bucket will take!

SULU

But Jim, what about the captain's orders?

KIRK

Damn the orders, we are going after Nero.

Under the command of Acting Lieutenant Kirk, the Enterprise saves the earth, rescues Captain Pike, and destroys the renegade Romulan ship. (Apologies to those who haven't seen the most recent Star Trek movie, but a happy ending is probably not a surprise.)



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Why do our fictional heroes so frequently disregard authority, and get away with it? In a recent episode of the PBS series *Inspector Lewis*, Detective Sergeant Hathaway is interrupted at his computer by Superintendent Innocent:

INNOCENT

What are you doing now, Hathaway?

HATHAWAY

Background search on the woman we found hanged in her flat.

INNOCENT

Spending more time again on a case that is solved? It has been ruled a suicide; tell Lewis I want you to get on to a case that needs your time.

As INNOCENT walks away DETECTIVE INSPECTOR LEWIS arrives. What's up? he asks.

HATHAWAY

We're to get on to the next case.

LEWIS

What does she know? Let's get out of here and find out why that woman died.

And so, Lewis and Hathaway disregard their supervisor's order, proceed to prove that the victim was murdered, and are praised despite their failure to follow orders. Not surprising here. In the series' predecessor, *Inspector Morse*, the hero moved in his own direction in every story; disdain for authority was palpable.

Our fictional heroes are attractive as reflections of our values; in the case of traditional heroes they exhibit loyalty, perseverance, courage, and intelligence; they allow us to experience life as we think it ought to be. How then, does disrespect for authority fit? Perhaps a protagonist's refusal to follow orders is enjoyable because it allows us to rebel vicariously against the never ending constraints of authority in every aspect of our lives. Or perhaps it is because, as heroes' courage and loyalty reflect life as it ought to be, their recognition that directives from afar are very often incorrect and so ought to be disregarded similarly, reflects life as it ought to be. The characters in

these stories succeed because they know more about their situation than their distant supervisors and act accordingly. Kirk had seen the power of Nero's weapon and knew that earth would be destroyed long before the fleet could rendezvous and move to defend it. Lewis and Hathaway had seen the victim and noticed inconsistencies in a verdict of suicide. Intuitively we recognize the rationality of disregarding flawed instructions given from afar.

Consequences

Unfortunately, our stories don't translate directly into our lives. In our lives there are likely to be serious consequences for disregarding authority. These can range from a brief dressing down or the beginning of a poor relationship with one's supervisor to a negative comment in one's personnel file. However, there are also consequences to the enforcement of rules and procedures that don't take into account the specifics of the situation.

I am reminded of a recent experience. As my wife and I waited at a bus stop downtown, a young man of senior high school age walked up carrying a very large piece of half inch plywood; it was at least 5' x 5'. His baggage may have been unusual, but he was clean cut and serious looking. When a bus arrived, he politely waited until everyone else had boarded and then picked up his board and carried it onto the bus. We, still on the sidewalk, heard sounds of confrontation from the bus driver followed by the young man disembarking. His face showed so much distress and uncertainty that it almost spoke for him, "What am I to do now? How am I going to get to class?" Was this a case where rules overcame rationality? The board was big, but no bigger than a bicycle, which is allowed on the buses. There were at least two places where the board could be placed without interfering with other passengers or causing a potentially dangerous situation. And the consequence for the young man was serious; he would not be able to get to his classroom or meeting site to make a scheduled presentation. This seems like a case in which rules trumped reason.

Delegation

Rules, procedures, and directives are part of our work lives. They need to be. Personnel need to work in coordination, activities must contribute to broad goals, consistency is important. But, do we rely on these methods of constraint on employees too much? Assembly line-like work is mostly a thing of the past, regimented processes with each step planned to fit the next step are less frequent, and our workforce, especially a library's staff, is intelligent and well-schooled.

Delegation and decision making as close to the activity as possible and long-standing management truisms, will reduce the number of times staff follows rules rather than using their intelligence. Neither is easy; each requires a

supervisor to give up some control of the operations in departments and services for which they are responsible. Most successful managers realize that because they cannot be everywhere, some delegation is absolutely necessary. In addition, today, managers should be able to delegate with more confidence. Organizational development strategies that broaden staff's understanding of a library's mission and goals and provide for shared decision making broaden the context for and improve the decision making ability of staff as does an emphasis on ongoing training.

Still, we all experience situations like that faced by the young man trying to use the bus; situations in which our only reaction is "it doesn't make any sense." For example, a personal banker with whom I have dealt for years at a bank we have used for years, and who had all the information needed to open a new account, told me that I had to wait until my application was reviewed by her supervisor who was busy but would be free within thirty minutes. The negative consequences of this experience were not particularly weighty; they were no more than some lost time and frustration on my part—nowhere near the destruction Kirk foresaw if he didn't act. But what if my bank transaction was a transfer of \$100,000 from another bank, and I was not about to wait thirty minutes for a supervisor to appear? Or what if in a library with strict adherence to rules, a board member personally known to the circulation clerk asked to take a book despite not having her library card? Whether on a large or small matter, there can be negative consequences when staff are required to follow rules rather than their intelligence. On the other hand, there can be positive consequences when staff are empowered to use their heads. For instance, when an oil change took much longer than I had been told it would, the service representative on his own discretion told me I did not have to pay for it. My commitment to that dealership increased; we purchased a new car there two weeks ago.

Trust

Delegation and pushing decision making closer to the activity are clearly necessary. However, I don't believe the bus driver kicked the young man off the bus only because of a rule about big things on buses. Rather, it was a culture of rule-following and little trust of management that focused the driver's decision making. It isn't enough to tell employees that rules are not absolute and to encourage interpretation as the situation demands. There must also be trust that an employee who does use his head will not then be criticized for a decision that might not have been the best. Everyone makes mistakes, even managers.

Trust within the organization is the third requirement for a library whose leadership wants the right decisions throughout the library. The staff needs to trust management; management needs to trust staff. A focus on building a culture of shared decision making and trust needs to be part of the development efforts within the library.