



Contrarian **Edge**

Why Staff People Fail

Whether your job gives you the cool pricklies or the warm fluffies depends in large measure on your ability to function in the staff role. All of us, in or out of management, are staff to at least one person: our boss.

When I was a young staffer, I had the opportunity to work for a very successful entrepreneur. Walking into his office one day, I announced that we had a problem. “Whoa, Clay, we do not have a problem, you have a problem. What would you like to tell me about it?” He then taught me the magic formula that got me quite a distance down the road to career success: DBMP→BMSA. Translation: Don’t bring me problems. Bring me solution alternatives.

William Oncken similarly wrote about monkey management, likening problems to monkeys: at first they look cute, but one quickly discovers they’re hard to control. The brilliant boss learns to keep the monkey on the subordinate’s back, and wise staffers soon learn the requirements of The Doctrine of Completed Staff Work (downloadable at <http://www.GoldStandardManagement.org/Resources/Articles/Articles.html>).

A thousand books trumpet how to be a successful leader, but few are interested in telling you how to be successful as staff. Interesting, since only 7% of the workforce occupy leadership positions. Staff people fail for very predictable reasons:

Teaches rather than counsels. Staffers sometimes think their expertise qualifies

them to play the role of expert and tend to begin with the last step instead of the beginning. Such an approach results in resistance on the part of the management buyer. Interestingly, the resistance tends not to be to the idea or the proposed technical change: the resistance is to the self-portrayed “expert” who has all the answers.

Poor listener. Staff people sometimes fail to listen fully as line management tries to tell them of blind spots (problems or situations that they have failed to consider). Preoccupied with the beauty of his own ideas and anticipation of his victory, this self-preoccupation and engrossment in the details makes the staffer oblivious to threats to the status, accomplishments, and political relationships that form the grid within which the customer has to operate.

Poor communicator. By this I mean speaking too well: his profuse expostulation and peripatetic meanderings through the lexicon are fabulously splendiferous. Knock off the razzle-dazzle and fancy verbal footwork. Speak plainly and simply directly to the issue, and do not try to impress with the vastness of your knowledge and complex figures.

Approach to objections. When a real red flag does appear and management begins to resist, the effective staff person does not try to bulldoze the program through. Instead, he looks for ways to work around the tender spot without affecting the worth of the total proposal. He is receptive to suggestions

from management on how to modify the proposal-baby.

It is better to win approval for three-quarters of the proposal than to put yourself into a win-lose struggle where you may lose all. Because the effective seller of ideas is a mediator and bargainer, he sees resistance not as a threat but a useful indicator that something is beginning to go wrong. The staff man who fails says: Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. The staffer who succeeds pauses and asks: What is getting out of adjustment? What nerve have I hit?

Years ago, Dr. Eugene Jennings identified many of the key traits among managers that get promoted and move upward. One is developing a coterie of crucial subordinates: staffers who do their job so well that when the executive moves up, he reaches back and takes them with him.

This pattern tends to cascade downward, and in major executive shifts can result in hundreds of personnel moves. When the promoted leader exits the organization, the brain-drain can make headlines. If your boss were to leave tomorrow, would she take you with her?

Clay Sherman, drclay@GoldStandardManagement.org, is a key spokesman for management professionalization and provides extensive free resources for organization high performance at www.GoldStandardManagement.org.