



September 11, 2008

Learn to give your office's control freaks the leadership they need

By Ed Brenegar

REAL LIFE LEADERSHIP COLUMNIST

Question: I work in a large office. There are two types of people in our office. On the one hand, there are control freaks who want to be involved in every decision, dictating to everyone what is right. Then there are those who do nothing. The control freaks don't get along with each other. It is really an unpleasant atmosphere. Is there anything I can do?

Answer: There is a leadership vacuum in your office. Without effective leadership, conflict over who controls the office grows. Why? Because control freaks have an inner sonar for disorder. They love order and will do what it takes to create it, even if it means making everyone in the office unhappy. Their desire for order rules out every other need or requirement.

Think I may be overstating this? Think again. Here are three types of control behaviors.

One type of control people believes they knows better than everyone, so they make unilateral decisions. They schedule meetings or order lunch without consulting with the rest of the group. They are highly skeptical of efforts to make offices more collaborative. There is an old joke about committees that goes, "What's the ideal committee? Three people who don't have the time, and one person who likes to do it his own way." This is that type of control behavior.

Another type of control is the fiddler, who wants to contribute to every little detail or decision. In an effort to get things right, these people push aside those who are responsible in order to create the order that makes them feel comfortable.

A third type of control behavior seeks to control the social environment of an office by being a critic of every initiative or comment. These people have an opinion about everything, regardless of whether they have knowledge or expertise. They challenge every statement and see themselves as the final word on everything. People who have solid ideas but not the personality for confrontation or debate ultimately remain quiet. As a result, they become passive contributors to a setting that allows for control freaks to take over.

These three types of people generally are well-meaning and should not be ostracized for their desire for order. Rather, they need to be led to understand the appropriate social and role boundaries. Their desire to control is evidence of the need for more order or structure.

Leading an office requires setting appropriate expectations for how people are to work together. This involves both respecting boundaries and speaking one's mind when things are not going well.

Effective leaders, who are responsible for a group of people who must work together, facilitate in the same way an orchestra conductor leads. They find balance between order and the freedom to speak and contribute without abuse. They do this by fostering respect between people that leads to the trust that is essential for working together.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.
