The Mailroom CEO: A Portrait of the Collaborative Leader

by John H. Wilson

Many types of organizations have assimilated team based, cross-functional and collaborative structures. According to Robinson and Harvey (2008), "The acceleration of globalization has created a chaotic state of change as businesses struggle to adapt new paradigms of leadership, in which the established tried and tested approaches may no longer be effective" (p. 466). However, organizations often fail to recognize the full benefit of these models because employees in operational posts still wait for direction from executives rather than embody leadership characteristics. Alternatively, "there are the people who have figured out that the company intranet is actually a pretty great way to ignore the organizational hierarchy, cut through the red tape, and join with other motivated people to get some real work done" (Weinberger, 1999). Organizational structures that inspire members toward a common mission can allow the task of leadership to shift fluidly to the individual with the highest degree of efficacy at any given point in time.

The following parable, based loosely on a book by Mead (1952), helps to illustrate this point. Jill finished business school during an economic downturn. She could not find a job in her field, so she took a job in the mailroom at Federated Package Delivery. The job offered little status and limited income. However, the company had a good benefits package and a culture that encouraged professional growth and development. Jill sorted and delivered incoming mail and internal memos throughout the day to employees in the five-story Federated headquarters building. She performed her assigned tasks efficiently and soon developed many acquaintances throughout the organization.

One morning, Jill was sitting at the corner coffee shop, sipping a cappuccino and reading the Wall Street Journal before work. She overheard a conversation between two men in business suits at the

table next to hers. One of the men looked sleepy and somewhat disheveled. She noticed an engraved plate on his briefcase that read AeroTech.

"It took until 4 o'clock this morning, but UPD signed the contract for the X-405," Jill heard him say. This caught her attention since UPD (Universal Package Delivery) was Federated's primary competitor. They rated second only to Federated in rapid package delivery.

The second man seemed intrigued. "Are you talking about the supersonic jet that flies around the globe in four hours automatically dropping laser-guided pods to distribution centers along the way?"

"That's right" he replied morosely. "UPD will be able to deliver three times as many packages in half the time for a quarter of the cost."

Jill was alarmed. She realized immediately that this would give UPD the capacity to take on three quarters of Federated's business, delivering faster and at a lower price. She wanted to move closer so she could hear more, but the men dropped the subject and began to discuss hockey scores.

She finished her drink and headed for the office. While she walked, she texted her friend Dave, a self-proclaimed technocrat in her community service club, who worked as a sales engineer at a GPS Manufacturer.

"HV U Heard of X-405? TSTB (the sooner the better)!" her message read.

Jill made her morning rounds not certain of what she should do with the newly discovered threat to her company. Before she arrived at the fifth floor executive suites, her mobile announced an incoming message from Dave:

 "X-405: mostly rumors, probably urban legend. Super-sonic AeroTech jet, crazy-fast. HTH (hope this helps)."

Jill asked the CEO's executive assistant if she could deliver his mail in person today. She learned that the CEO was in China for a few months forging relationships in an effort to further the

company's Asian expansion. She did not explain why she wanted the audience, but moved on to make her deliveries on the fourth floor.

She found all the office doors closed. The door marked Charles Newman, VP of Operations, opened only long enough for a hand to reach out and take a package marked "extremely urgent" directly from Jill. Along with the package was a memo cancelling a lunch meeting scheduled for that day. She overheard someone inside say something about needing to upgrade the tracking systems installed in their delivery trucks. When she got to the lift, she texted Dave again,

"Call Charles Newman VP Ops at Federated 2DAY ABT new GPS in Fed's trucks. DNT quote me!" Dave responded immediately "2G2BT Thnx" (Too good to be true, thanks).

On the third floor, conference rooms overflowed with large groups of people viewing Power Point or flip-chart presentations. Jill traded waves with her friend Krista from the project management corps whom she met through the company's mentoring program.

On the second floor, Jill started to have some more direct human contact. Managers from various departments and cross-functional teams congregated in open work areas and groups of cubicles used on a temporary basis. Ralph and Suzanne, from the logistics organization, greeted her warmly; both were working on an ERP software implementation project. Jill took the opportunity to ask some questions about how Federated delivered packages around the globe. Twenty minutes later, although she was behind in her delivery schedule, she had learned enough to realize that Federated's current process would be no match for the X-405. As she left, she overheard Ralph and Suzanne discussing how the recent resignation of the ERP project manager would affect their timeline.

On the first floor, she stopped to visit with Jamie in Finance.

"How does our company decide when to spend money on a big project," she asked rather abruptly.

Jamie seemed a little stunned. This was not a normal discussion topic when they spoke. Jamie explained the process for proposal review and approvals for in-depth analysis, followed by various studies and "proof of concept" models.

"Finally, a budget is approved for the following year at which time there is an executive review and funding," Jamie said.

"But what if we need to spend money now?!?" Jill asked.

Jamie chuckled, "Unless there's some kind of emergency, it just doesn't work that way at Federated." Jill lingered making small talk, then moved on and finished her first round of deliveries for the day.

During her mid-morning break, Jill mulled over what she needed to do. She formulated a plan and sprang into action. Her cart now full again and ready for a new round of deliveries, she started on the first floor so she could ask Jamie how to create an "emergency." Between deliveries on the second floor, she stopped at Ralph and Suzanne's work area and announced that she might be able to help them find a project manager.

I'll explain later," she said and then asked if they could answer some questions related to logistics. They both immediately agreed to meet her at noon in Charles Newman's office.

The next stop was the third floor. Just as she had hoped, some of the meetings were letting out and she saw Krista at the far end of the building. Jill made deliveries as quickly as she could, making her way down to Krista's office. She asked if Krista could share her perspective on evaluating large-scale projects at a meeting with Charles Newman. Krista agreed to meet Jill at his office at noon.

Jill slowed her steps as she moved toward the elevator. She took a few deep breaths as she pressed the button marked "4" inside the lift. Everything hinged on the next three minutes. She checked the basket and confirmed that there were not any deliveries for Mr. Newman this time. She left the cart a few doors down the hall and knocked on his door. "Come on in" she heard from the other side. Mr. Newman looked up from a stack of spreadsheets over his reading glasses at Jill. Before he could say anything, Jill began to speak.

"Hi Charles, I'm Jill Sullivan from downstairs. My team and I have uncovered a serious potential competitive threat that could jeopardize our market share by 50% or more in less than a year. Would it be possible for us to go over the details with you at noon today?"

"I'd actually be interested in hearing more about it now, but I'm about to join a conference call and then I have a lunch appointment…" His voice trailed off as he looked at the memo on his desk. Jill recalled the memo about his noon lunch meeting.

"My noon appointment is cancelled," he said. "I'll be glad to meet with your team. She thanked him and left as his phone began to ring.

Jill quickly finished the deliveries on the fourth and then the fifth floor and headed back to the mailroom. She needed to bring everyone up to speed. There was no time for a meeting, so she initiated a real time chat from her mobile with Krista, Ralph, Suzanne, and Jamie. She explained the situations and introduced them to one another other.

Krista understood the gravity of Jill's new information immediately and invited her friend in software development to join the discussion. Ralph introduced a friend from marketing who forwarded a document to each of their PDAs with preliminary analysis of the threat posed by a technology such as the X-405 in their competitor's fleet. The information was compiled earlier in the year but was not recognized as a priority. In less than 10 minutes, the team agreed on their approach.

At noon sharp, the cohort arrived at the office of Charles Newman, VP of Operations.

<div align="center">**Implications of the Mailroom CEO**</div>

Consider four implications of this story. The first two are from an organizational structure perspective – the CEO view. The other two are from the operational perspective – the Mailroom view.

The CEO View

The first thing for the CEO to consider is that many companies have implemented some kind of team-based or collaborative mechanism without abdicating much of the bureaucracy and hierarchy that would allow the new model to succeed. Harvard leadership expert Heifelz (2004) posited, "Leadership is most usefully viewed as an activity rather than a formal position or personal characteristic, and it may or may not be accompanied by authority" (p. 23).

Second, methods of employee evaluation still follow a transactional leadership model where managers "exchange things of value with subordinates to advance their own and their subordinates' agendas" (Northouse, 2007, p. 185). While this will encourage successful execution of some desirable objectives, it does not create an environment that is safe for innovation or new approaches to old problems. In contrast, transforming leadership "occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and reality" (Burns, 1978, p. 20). While self-interest is efficacious in guiding core tasks, Bass (2006) spoke of "the extraordinary commitment of followers of transformational leaders that underlies the exceptional performance of many groups led by transformational leaders" (p. 32).

The Mailroom View

Operational employees are rarely enlightened to the opportunities available in business models such as these that allow them to innovate, to stretch themselves or to help take the organization to new levels. This is rarely an issue of self-efficacy, but rather a problem of permission. "You can't get the job without experience, and you can't get experience without the job" (Citron, R. & Smith, R., 2003, p. 73). Citron & Smith encouraged individuals to use direct & implied permission as opportunities to expand their influence on their organization and customers.

The second consideration from the Mailroom View is for employees to fully understand and embrace the mission of the organization. Once the individual does that, they can effectively go beyond their core activities and look for ways to help the firm more effectively achieve the mission form the context of their particular area of expertise.

Consider a familiar example from the Old Testament, that of David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17:1-58). Goliath represented a unique threat to the army because of his substantial size and his renown as a warrior. King Saul and his generals were not clear about how to address this threat, and the fate of the entire nation rested on their decision. The call for volunteers went unanswered, demonstrating that the soldiers, though loyal, were not comfortable putting themselves in a situation that seemed beyond their skills and weaponry. The solution came in the form of a young boy not even deemed worthy to serve in the army, let alone take sole responsibility for the outcome of an entire war. His success depended on the magnate's willingness to trust and empower someone who seemingly lacked even the most basic qualification for battle. Through David's unwavering commitment to God

and country and an innovative approach, the tables were completely turned. On both the temporal and spiritual levels, Goliath unwittingly showed up with a knife for a gunfight.

The Message for the CEO

If you are facing the problem of fully leveraging a collaborative organizational structure, then you or one of your predecessors have already gone to great lengths to make the organization more fluid and flexible to change as environmental conditions require. The next phase of development is to go to the mailroom and identify where unneeded bureaucracy still stands in the way of flexibility. What if Jill worked in your mailroom? What barriers would she face if she were to raise the alarm or attempt to affect a meaningful adaptation to a new threat?

Some possible remedies:

1. Create a process for individuals to issue a formal challenge to policies or tollbooths that impede a rapid change in a crisis.
2. Create a fund that employees can access with relatively little authorization to study or investigate an innovative idea or possible competitive threat. Those using this resource would fully document and post their findings in a central repository accessible to all employees for future analysis or inquiries. As Kerlinger and Lee (2000) put it, "even when hypotheses are not confirmed, they have power" (p. 34).
3. Implement collective professional networking technologies (i.e. Instant Messenger, Twitter, etc.) company-wide, but also train employees in every role about how to use them effectively to expand and leverage their own personal network both inside and outside the organization. In this way, relationships and connections can fill gaps as hierarchy recedes.

The Message for the Mailroom

Collaborative organizational structures can seem ambiguous and confusing. However, the idea is to allow the individuals closest to a problem or opportunity to take decisive action with the best view to a solution. "[P]rominence, resources or positions of authority do not define leadership. Significant leadership often comes from the margins of society, without authority" (Heifeltz, 2004, p. 24). Therefore, you as an individual can go beyond core responsibilities and explore your potential as a leader, as a learner, and as an innovator regardless of your role or title in the organization. This attitude combined with a thorough understanding of the organization's mission and values can open countless doors and provide experience that is beyond the scope of a current role.

Some possible approaches:

1. In a recent article, Stewart D. Friedman (2008) suggested developing small experiments that "produce a change intended to fulfill multiple goals that benefit each and every domain of your life" (p. 115). In other words, try something new and record the results. If it works, keep doing it. If it does not, try a different experiment.
2. If your company does not provide professional networking technologies, use free connection tools like LinkedIn or Plaxo to expand your personal reach.
3. Take initiative when you see problems in your work that may represent widespread organizational issues or perhaps opportunities to distinguish the services of your department or organization from others. Consider the direct and indirect implications of these problems on other parts of the organization in order to rally supporters and demonstrate the quantifiable potential impact of your proposed change.

Conclusion

Most popular leadership theory and concepts, target executive managers in hierarchical organizations. This is often the case even when the theory or model proposes a shift towards collaboration or empowerment. As a result, the needed transition from centralized leadership to decentralized leadership misses the mark. These models succeed when they allow the person closest to a problem or opportunity to act immediately.

There are implications deserving future study from the perspective of both the CEO and the Mailroom in order to build the kind of organization with leaders in every role rather than an army of employees waiting for instructions from the top.

About the Author

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