Rule One

Who’s Your Team?

Position does not define power—impact defines power. Impact can be made in every role at every level, and when we prioritize bringing out the best in those around us, business growth and success follow. We’re at a critical time where deeply held notions about work are rapidly evolving. We must cultivate diverse workplaces where space is created for honest and constructive feedback and where associates further each other’s success. In short, we need to build organizations that value and encourage co-elevation. —Mindy Grossman, CEO, WW International

Sandy was exhausted and angry. “Taking this job was a huge mistake,” she told me. “The corporate politics here are ridiculous. It’s like Game of Thrones, but without the chivalry.”

The HR director for a national bank in Chicago, Sandy was dealing with problems dumped on her that were beyond her authority to fix. Her biggest challenge was a companywide project she was heading that would centralize HR’s control of pay incentives throughout the organization. Not long after Sandy launched the initiative, she and her boss caught wind of a plan by the sales department to implement its own bonus incentive program.

Sandy’s boss worried that HR would look bad if other departments followed the sales department’s example and set up similar independent bonus programs. If that happened, HR’s centralized program would almost certainly fail to meet its projected cost savings. But her boss didn’t want to confront the head of sales on the issue, so he laid the problem at Sandy’s feet. He asked her to persuade Jane, the head of sales operations and the department’s second-in-command, to drop the sales bonus plan. “Nip it in the bud,” he told Sandy.

Sandy lacked the authority to tell Jane what to do, so she wasn’t surprised when Jane responded flat out that the department needed its
own targeted bonus system to remedy its soft fourth-quarter sales results. Sandy was left in an impossible position. She lacked the authority to force the sales department to comply with the new HR initiative, and her boss would be angry if the initiative failed.

Sandy was one of the best young executives I knew. I had met her several years earlier during work FG had done with her previous employer. She reached out and asked me to have lunch before a talk I was giving in Chicago to a group of HR leaders, and I gladly accepted. A few others I’d invited to join couldn’t make it, so it ended up being just me and Sandy.

Before our meal arrived, Sandy set down her iced tea and confided that she was thinking of looking for a new job. “I just don’t know if I’m cut out for this place,” she said. She had earned this job, with its big title and salary, by being a good leader who always took care of her staff. They knew she had their backs; that’s why she was so naturally adept at getting more from them than anyone expected.

As frustrated as Sandy was with Jane, she also felt victimized and abandoned by her boss for his refusal to confront the head of sales over the issue. Her complaints sounded all too familiar to me. Politics within an organization can be extremely demoralizing and create a victim mentality in even the ablest people. I had certainly felt victimized at Starwood when the new president took away my budget authority as CMO.

But I had a question for Sandy. “Are you absolutely certain that your companywide bonus program is the best answer for sales? Will your program help sales make their quarter?”

Sandy admitted that she couldn’t be sure, but that it wasn’t really her first concern. It was sales’s responsibility to make its numbers, which it had repeatedly failed to do, and Sandy had enough problems of her own. She’d also been charged with leading a cross-functional team to develop a mobile app for HR, and that project was running behind. People from
other departments critical to the app’s design and launch kept missing her meetings. It was another instance of people outside her chain of command threatening to undermine projects that she would be held accountable for.

How’s Your Team?

I asked Sandy, “How’s your team doing?”

“My people are as frustrated as I am,” she said. “You know me. I try to protect them as best I can.”

I asked her again, “Yes, but how’s your team?”

Sandy smiled, familiar with my coaching methods. “What’s the game, Keith? I just told you how they are.”

“I’m telling you this as someone who cares deeply about you and your career,” I said. “The team you’re failing is the team you don’t even realize exists.”

“Okay,” she said cautiously. “What team are you talking about?”

“Young team,” I told her, “is made up of everyone who is critical to helping you achieve your mission and goals.”

Like nearly all managers, Sandy saw her team as her direct reports within the org chart. But Sandy faced far too many obstacles in getting her work done to take such a limited view of her leadership responsibilities. The only way to overcome all those obstacles successfully was for Sandy to embrace the notion that her team was a much larger network of people, far beyond the HR employees she was assigned to supervise.

That was the difficult proposition I had for Sandy. Could she inspire that same team commitment and performance among people over whom she
had no authority? More specifically, could she engage with the sales department as though they were members of her own team, with the same sense of common purpose and shared desire to find solutions?

My goal in our conversation was to help shift Sandy’s mindset away from seeing herself as a victim, and instead see herself as a leader of a larger team. Every workplace suffers from office politics. The remedy is to lead a team of your own creation. To lead others who do not necessarily report to you. In other words, to lead without authority.

And that’s the foundation of Rule One of the new work rules. You must awaken to the realization that for every goal you have, for every project or mission you have, you are responsible for leading a much broader group of people than the formal members of your team. The more ambitious the mission, the broader this group will be, and yet your leadership of this group must be as committed as it would be if each one of them were reporting to you.

Most of us feel a sense of loyalty and obligation to the formal teams we are assigned to, or that are assigned to us. We care about the people on our teams—at least, on good days. We support them and go to bat for them; we want them to succeed and grow. Now, as the work continues to shift toward more loosely organized cross-functional teams, we have to extend that same degree of care, concern, commitment, and camaraderie to all our new team members—even the people we don’t yet realize are on the team. It’s the only way to achieve extraordinary results.

Excerpted from Leading Without Authority by Keith Ferrazzi and Noel Weyrich. Copyright © 2020 by Keith Ferrazzi. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.