



Just tell me what to do!

"I'm committed to this organization, but I don't understand what they want anymore. I wish they would just tell me what to do!"

The manager overhearing this conversation from the next room shrugs with frustration and thinks, "I've told them. They just don't get it!"

What is the mystery that underlies this exchange? Managers spend time communicating goals, listening to concerns, and seeking to move the organization toward a shared vision and mission. Employees and volunteers try to meet expectations and be a part of the team.

Hours are committed to writing accurate job descriptions and developing checklists for processes. Some employers even develop replicable hiring criteria. Annual reviews for employees and volunteers are carefully defined and prepared. While all the while, research shows that people are so stressed by annual performance reviews that productivity suffers for weeks before and after the review.

There is an unspoken agenda in many organizations that can undermine the best intentions of managers and the employees and volunteers. Yet few persons on either side of the equation consider what is the most wished for workplace attribute: that people take on personal responsibility for and ownership of their work and the organization — that people act as if they are self-employed at work.

Here are some of the unwritten attributes that define the self-employed at work phenomenon:

- *Be creative and inventive* – see your work as owned by yourself, not by your employer or supervisor.
- *Be self-initiating and self-evaluating* – identify problems and issues and evaluate what is working and what isn't. Suggest and initiate potential solutions. Don't wait for others to do it for you.
- *Take responsibility* – see yourself as someone who participates in creating the internal and external work environment. You are as responsible for what happens in the organization as the next person, including your supervisor.
- *Be professional* – master and author your work role and career. Set your own goals as a professional. Don't be an apprentice forever, continually imitate others, or only mimic the company line.

- *See the system as a whole* – look beyond your own role and part to see the whole, your relationship to the whole, and how the parts work together. Look for ways to contribute positively to the whole, not only to your part.

While most of us were hired or volunteered for a specific position and may not actually be “self-employed,” I would invite consideration of the idea that managers’ biggest, unwritten wish is that people within the organization, both employees and volunteers, take ownership of their job, that they become self-employed at work.

Managers can shift the conversation from telling people what needs to be done to encouraging people to take the initiative. Managers can intentionally seek opportunities for mentoring and coaching people to set their own goals and take personal responsibility. Managers can aid the shift by making certain that everyone on the team understands the larger context – a system view – from company to State and Federal regulations to local community concerns.

Some will say that this won’t work in their company. But, whether you lead by title or from the reception desk, every day you can ask, “What is one thing I can do today that will make a difference in my organization? How can I encourage someone to take responsibility or consider how what they are doing impacts all of the others in our organization? Can I mentor someone to set their own goals and begin to see themselves as self-employed at work?”

The challenge is to stop making checklists, filling out performance forms, and telling people what to do next long enough to ask what it is that we really want. Then to start doing something different to create the change we wish to see.

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