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The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work

by Peter Block

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35 Highlights | 7 Notes

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 190

The Empowered Manager is written for two kinds of people: (1) managers involved in running an organization and struggling every day with how to create and leave behind an organization they personally believe in, one that expresses their deepest values about work, achievement, contribution, and the spiritual dimensions of life; and (2) those working somewhere in the middle of an organization and feeling powerless to make the changes they want and believing that some of their bosses are problems to be solved.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 446

Our primitive fear in organizations is that if we stand up, we will be shot. This book is about standing up without getting shot.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 456

In fact, the first rule of politics is that nobody will tell you the rules.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 506

Having grown up in traditional, hierarchical organizations with patriarchal values, too many of us believe that in order to manage the politics of our situation, we must become good at Manipulating situations and, at times, people Managing information and plans carefully to our own advantage Invoking the names of high-level people when seeking support for our projects Becoming calculating in the way we manage relationships Paying great attention to what the people above us want from us Living with the belief that in order to get ahead, we must be cautious in telling the truth These are elements of what is generally called playing the game.

Yep

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 515

The problem is that getting better at maneuvering-type politics is not a very satisfying solution, even though it works. Why get better at a bad game? Our purpose is to create a good game. The good game involves acting as an agent or entrepreneur for our unit and being political in the best sense of the word. It means being political as an act of service, contribution, and creation.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 552

When we choose maintenance, we are trying to hold onto what we have created or inherited. Our wish is to not lose ground. A traditional culture constantly drives us toward a maintenance mentality.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 556

We might have the illusion that as we move up the ladder, confidence will build and risk taking will increase. But the opposite often occurs. The higher we go, the greater the wish for safety and the desire to hold onto what we have become: the greater the fall, the greater the tragedy and the greater the wish for maintenance.

Seen this so many times

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 616

Organizational courage is required when the sides are somewhat murky, when the issue in and of itself is less than monumental, and when we feel that top management is, in fact, not on our side. The choice for self-assertion and risk is the antidote for caution and maintaining what we have inherited. The hard part is to be able to tell the difference between courage and recklessness, and that is what this book is about.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 624

Autonomy is the attitude that my actions are my own choices and the organization I am a part of is in many ways my own creation. It puts us in the center and in charge of what is happening at the moment. We are the cause, not the effect. This also sets the stage for collective empowerment, which requires recognition that we are interdependent. No outcome comes from an individual; it is always a communal event.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 689

Four elements are critical in understanding organizational politics: (1) the contract between the individual and the organization, (2) how each of us defines our self-interest, (3) the tactics we use in generating support for our activities, and (4) the basic autonomy, interdependence, or dependency that each cycle fosters. These elements form a self-reinforcing cycle that results in either an entrepreneurial or a bureaucratic way of operating.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 732

Positive political skills involve acting with autonomy and compassion in service of a vision, which is very much aligned with the entrepreneurial spirit. The original meaning of politics was to act in service of society. Politics was a high form of public service.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 743

The Entrepreneurial Contract. The entrepreneurial cycle begins with a contract that is based on the belief that the most trustworthy source of authority comes from within the person. The primary task of supervision is to help

people trust their own instincts and take responsibility for the success of the business. The contract demands that people make a serious commitment to the organization but do so because they want to, not because they have to. The expectation is that people at each level will treat the business as their own.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 763

When we sign on with an organization, we agree to four core elements that guide our behavior: Submission to authority Denial of self-expression Sacrifice for unnamed future rewards Belief that the first three elements are just

Sadly, true lots of places

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 803

When we are asked how we feel about something, the answer is, “Who cares? We're here to get a job done; we're here to be rational and logical and to get on with the business at hand. This is no place to talk about feelings.” In fact, one of the strongest terms of contempt is to say to somebody, “Let's not get into that touchy/feely stuff.” How is it that touching and feeling have become such negative terms in organizational life? It is as if work were not personal. In fact, everything in our work is personal, and it should be. Work is the place where we spend most of our lives, and we all care deeply about what happens there, both with the work to be done and the people around us.

Yes!

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 853

We fear that people basically do not have the wish or the ability to act responsibly and that external authority must be constantly reinforced in order to keep us focused on common goals for the common purpose.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 878

Experiments have been conducted in organizations that give people more autonomy and more control. The immediate aftereffect of loosening control is a period of floundering, chaos, and lower productivity. People are so conditioned to operate in a highly structured environment that when some of the structure is taken away in the service of an entrepreneurial objective, there is a period in which people will test how much authority they have. They'll act in their own interest, and unpredictable events—some of which will not be in the best interests of the organization—will take place. It is easy then to conclude that the external control is needed. What we are ignoring is that unpredictable events not in the best interest of the organization also take place under highly controlled structures. The act of having a high-control, top-down organization in itself creates its own resistance. We're going to lose control in some sense no matter what kind of external structure we create. In fact, the actual control the manager has over subordinates is somewhat of an illusion. A manager has every right to tell people what to do, but then, on their own, people decide whether they're going to do it. Wartime experiences and sporting events are the common metaphors rationalizing the need for external authority.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 930

From childhood we have been presented with images and messages that the acquisition of material things is a goal worth striving for. “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” No matter how much you have, it is not enough. As managers we often rely on our subordinates' wish to get ahead as a means of controlling them. The essence of performance evaluation is using the threat or promise of influencing people's salary, promotion, and safety in order to get subordinates to operate in ways that we desire. We use these personal, tangible rewards as ways of making sure the organization goals get met. And it works. The problem is that we pay a price for this tremendous emphasis on personal payoff as a motivational device. Fundamentally, it creates a culture of compliance that often does not serve the business.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 985

The pressures, isolation, and competitiveness at the top drive people to worry much more about maintaining what they have, act with undue caution, and feel much more dependent than their position would seem to warrant. The consequence is that it is rare to find a willingness to risk and a choice for change at the top of the organization. You find the rhetoric of change, but not the experience. Anyone who has a job that allows them to work at all levels of the organization realizes that the higher in the pyramid one goes, the greater the caution, secretiveness, and politicking. The more we have in tangible rewards, the more we want to hold onto them. As we move up the organization, we become more concerned about what we have to lose than what we are trying to create.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1105

There is a saying that in therapy all of the most important statements are made in the first 10 minutes and the last 10 minutes. In the first 10 minutes, we express what we are worried about, and in the last 10 minutes, faced with the imminent ending of our session, we begin to tell the truth. If the therapy session lasts 50 minutes, we use the middle 30 minutes to blame others, talk about how tough our life is, and explain how we have done everything humanly possible and it still hasn't worked.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1131

Now hear this Now hear this This is the captain speaking This is the captain speaking That is all That is all —
Old Navy proverb

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1171

The higher we are, the more dependent we are upon layers on layers of the organization to find out what is really going on. Top executives get so frustrated trying to discover the truth about what is happening beneath them that they bring in staff groups to act as their agents. This is why so many corporate staff groups grow large. Top managers, frustrated with their lack of information and control, create staff auditors, planners, performance managers, and trainers to circumvent the normal channels. These groups manifest a wish on the part of executives to maintain control but are also an acknowledgment that they don't have the control.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1186

Control occurs when we guide other people's behavior and let them know that we are doing so. Manipulation occurs when we try to influence others and act as if we are not.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2485

We become political at the moment we attempt to translate our vision into action.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 2528

We need our allies' confirmation on our approach, and we need their information on where other players in the game stand. Many of the people we view as opponents or difficult people in our melodrama are, in fact, opponents only through our own perception. There is a tendency based on very little data to see adversaries even where they don't exist. Our allies help us in evaluating our perceptions and in knowing the extent of the difficulty we face.

Great reminder from Peter Block

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2548

The task of the opponent is to bring out the best in us. We need to be grateful for those who oppose us in a high-trust way, for they bring the picture of reality and practicality to our plans. Their role is to challenge what we are doing in service of making us personally stronger and our strategies more effective.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 2553

To work in organizations, to have a vision, to live near the wilderness, to have hope, and to find meaning in our work is to pick an unsafe and difficult arena. We know that if we pick an unsafe and difficult arena, it will have brought out the best in us, and the movement toward our vision will have greater meaning for us. That is why opponents are so valuable.

Yes!

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2582

Many times people we view as adversaries are really opponents. The test is whether we trust these people. Those we trust are not adversaries but simply people who take a different position than we do. Our task is to embrace these people and to engage in dialogue and conversation with them. It is especially true if they are users of our service or our product. The people who use our service or product let us know what is needed and valuable in our product or service.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2605

When we have less than complete trust in people, we usually think it is their fault. We talk about the fact that they don't trust us. We have evidence as to what they have done that proves them untrustworthy. Even in the face of this, we need to treat them well.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2612

The key to this step is to talk about the difficulty in the relationship rather than the difficulty in the other person. At some point we have to acknowledge that we have, in fact, contributed to some of the difficulty in this relationship and that our wish is to find a way of moving ahead with the project, acknowledging the caution that exists between the two of us.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2624

In some ways we have to forgive our bedfellows and see that their (through our eyes) untrustworthy behavior was not born of their wish to hurt us. It was most likely a result of their own vulnerability and being caught up in their own bureaucratic cycle. We forgive them their choice for caution and self-protection.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2631

The traditional image of deal making with bedfellows is smoke-filled back rooms and closely guarded aces played at the eleventh hour. Leave this to the movies and the state capitol. Our trip is on the main street, in full view, for all to see.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 2689

Many times we identify others as adversaries when, in fact, we've had very little conversation with them and very little contact. Never let third-party opinions about a person influence us. Gossip is gossip is gossip. It is fun and completely unreliable. All we are hearing is third parties' projections onto the person in question.

So true

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2769

Letting go of our adversaries means we expect nothing from them. If making demands on adversaries could lead to some agreement, then negotiation would be possible and we would have to question whether these people were truly our adversaries. It is difficult to end the meeting without making demands. We have such a strong instinct for reciprocity that if we have owned up to our contribution to the problem and disclosed our plans, we want a like response. If we can't leave the meeting without making demands, then we are not ready to let go. The choice between letting go and maintaining the struggle with hopes of conversion or victory can be painful. After all, it takes a long time to nurture and develop an adversary. We have invested a lot of energy, had many conversations, and mounted a series of assaults with a few partial victories.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2793

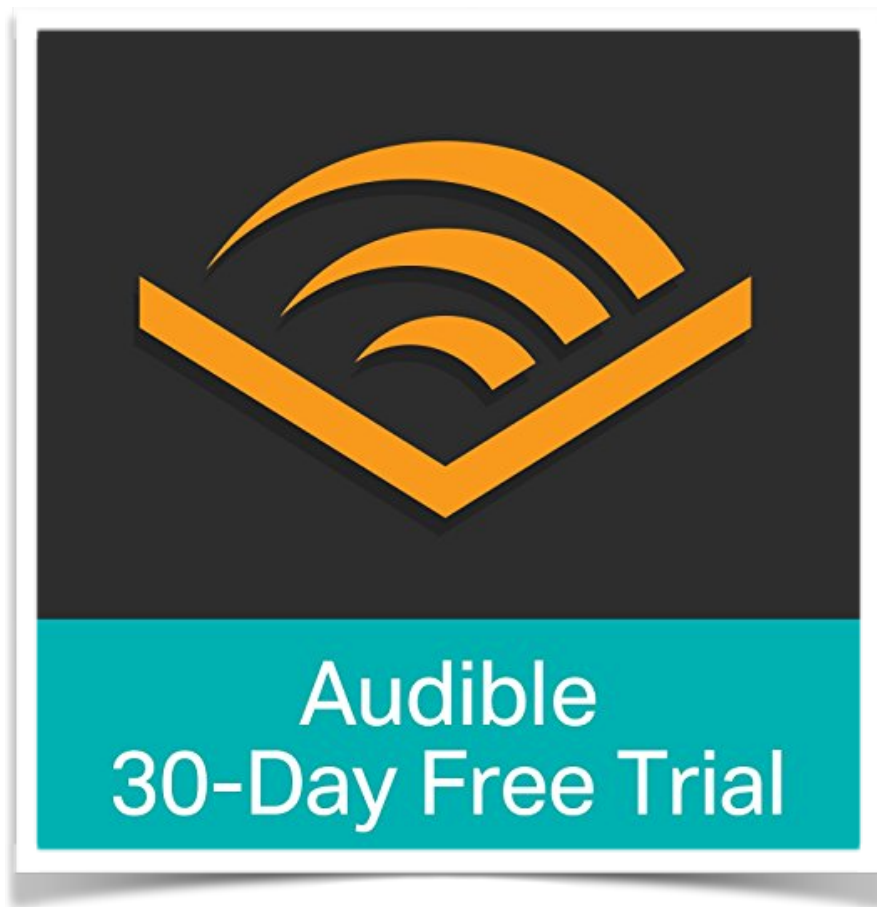
We might as well negotiate hard with an adversarial boss because we have little to lose. I have seen many people who have prematurely concluded that their bosses were adversaries without ever expressing what they wanted from them. The primary choices open to us are to act as if the boss were only an opponent or bedfellow, with negotiation a possibility, or to leave and look for peace in another department.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2805

Having an adversarial subordinate is frustrating enough for us, but it is a nightmare for the other person. The solution here also is to let go, but in the case of subordinates, we ask them to leave. The first choice, of course, is to keep negotiating and try to rebuild some trust in the relationship. Luckily in most cases this will work out. We can live with subordinates who are opponents, fence sitters, and even bedfellows. The goal is to move the subordinate into one of these categories by building trust or agreement. When this fails, the only compassionate act is to ask the subordinate to opt out.

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