

Balancing Authority and Collaboration: A Key to Successful Leadership

8 Keys To Balance Leadership Authority & Collaboration

By [Stephen Haslam](#) and [Robert Pennington, Ph.D.](#), [RESOURCE INTERNATIONAL](#)

8 Keys To Balance Leadership Authority & Collaboration

1. Personal Power Trumps Position Power
2. Expect resistance to authority
3. Address levels of concern
4. Don't ask permission
5. Communicate "The 4 P's of Transition"
6. Engage leaders at all levels
7. Demonstrate respect to build trust and commitment
8. Get tools in your tool belt

The 1st Key: Personal Power Trumps Position Power

"It is a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead and find no one there."

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Every leader is challenged to balance the responsibility for making decisions and the need to collaborate with others to produce desired results. Unfortunately most leaders have unconscious habits that trigger resistance, turning collaboration into competition and sabotage. Before long, employees are competing more with each other than they are working together to beat their company's competition.

A supervisor was instructed to begin conducting regular team meetings in which employees could collaborate on work projects. The Supervisor said, "Why should I collaborate with my employees, they know nothing of value. I tell them what they need to do and it's their job to do it." That supervisor no longer works at that company because he could not adopt the company's collaborative approach based on valuing the input of each employee. He felt his authority to make decisions would be threatened by having to listen to opinions different than his own. This is evidence of leadership immaturity.

Clearly, this supervisor thought his 'position power' gave him the authority he needed to manage his team. He was partly correct in that a manager or supervisor is given authority by people with greater authority to give instructions, to hire and to fire. But that does not necessarily mean employees will choose to follow his or her lead or implement what he believes is best. According to Kouzes & Posner ([Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It](#), 1993), "Leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow."

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Leaders who are truly influential are so because people choose to follow them.

Leadership influence is based on voluntary “followership.” An individual earns his or her leadership through contributions deemed beneficial by others. Followers find that the leader’s contributions enhance their well-being. Such influence is not bestowed upon a manager with the position title; it is earned by collaborating with employees and co-workers.

But this does not mean that in order to win people’s trust and respect a leader must buy it with favors or ask their permission. One CEO tried to create a supportive work environment by providing benefits such as free lunches and gym memberships. An employee complained that the company should build a gym right in the building because it was inconvenient for him to travel the 1.5 miles during lunch to the local gym. The CEO’s attempt to please contributed to a sense of entitlement that eventually made it difficult for managers to hold people accountable for doing their jobs if they felt unsupported.

One of the greatest challenges of anyone in a position of authority is to balance the “position power” of authority with the “personal power” of collaboration. Fortunately there are ways to successfully address this challenge.

This article uses excerpts from a more expanded four-part series of articles entitled, [Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership](#). The series describes why balancing authority and collaboration is a key element in implementing strategic plans, managing projects, and producing expected business results.

The 2nd Key: Expect Resistance To Authority

The 1st Key in this series focused on how a leader’s position (authority) can actually get in the way of gaining trust and positive influence with others (collaboration). But no matter how experienced or effective you are as a leader, you should expect some resistance to your authority.

Executives are responsible for executing strategic and financial goals. Supervisors are responsible for delivering projects and initiatives on time and on budget in support of those strategic and financial goals. To accomplish these things they need to manage the employees to get the work done.

All too often a goal is established or a problem is identified, management pulls together the best and brightest to craft a plan or a solution and the system or process is set in motion. But employees resist, ignore, and find work-arounds, and as a result the objectives are not achieved.

Some leaders think that by merely telling employees what needs to be that they should simply do their jobs and not complain. These leaders perceive resistance as inappropriate; evidence that a person is not “a team player” and not doing their job. It is

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an unfortunate reality that managers, supervisors, and leaders at any level will have to deal with resistance that employees have to authority. But managers need to focus on reducing the resistance first, before trying to get their point across.

The 3rd Key: Address Levels Of Concern

Don't assume that just by telling someone what needs to be done that they will be motivated to do it well. According to John Kotter, professor at Harvard Business School and author of 15 books on leadership, *"People change their behavior when they are (internally) motivated to do so, and that happens when you speak to their feelings. You don't have to spend a million dollars and six months to prepare for a change effort. You do have to make sure that you touch people emotionally."* (Kotter)

The Concerns Based Adoption Model ([CBAM](#))^{*} hypothesizes a predictable hierarchy of concerns that individuals experience when adopting any new innovation: Concerns for Self, Task, and Impact. Most companies only give attention to employees' Concern for Task, whatever the employee needs to know to do the work. Kotter also wrote, *"Employees need to understand that the changes are not oddball ideas being pushed by the bosses. They need to see short-term wins that demonstrate the validity of the change vision (concerns about impact). If the win is not ambiguous, is visible (concerns about task), and is of value to people (concerns about self), then people will say, "yes, I get it" and be more likely to help make change happen."* (Kotter)

The 4th Key: Don't Ask Permission

The first three keys in this series focused on how the inevitable resistance to authority inhibits collaboration, and that it is important to address employee's concerns for the tasks they are expected to do, the positive impact to expect, and how any changes will affect the employees themselves. But this should not be a process of asking permission.

Don't let the process of understanding concerns turn into a series of gripe sessions. When preparing a mission the United States Marines follow the principle, "Decide, and then invite dissent."* Officers don't ask the soldiers for permission, but once the mission is defined they do expect heated debate about the best way to execute the mission plan. As a result, by the time the troops engage everyone is on board because their concerns were addressed in the planning stages.

[The Decision Making Flowchart](#) is a useful model for moving a team toward consensus, without relinquishing ultimate authority over the final outcome. The flowchart clarifies the difference between Unanimous Decisions (everyone agrees) and Consensus Decisions (some disagreements exist, but people have been heard and understood, and will accept and support the decision), and highlights the risks taken by imposing Decision by Authority without going through the process of getting input from stakeholders.

The 5th Key: Communicate "The 4 P's of Transition"

The first few keys point out how resistance to authority inhibits collaboration, and why it is important to address employee's concerns without relinquishing authority by asking permission. The 4 P's of Transition is a valuable model in this balancing act when communicating about strategic changes.

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People will be more motivated to work toward a strategic objective or contribute to a project if they understand (1) The *Purpose*; why we have to do this, (2) The *Picture*: What it will look and feel like when we reach our goal, (3) The *Plan*: Step-by-step, how we will get there, (4) The *Part*: What you can (and need to) do to help us move forward. (*Bridges*)

The CEO, President, or highest Executive Sponsor is the best person to communicate messages that influence control over the direction of the business (Purpose, Picture, Plan), while the Direct Supervisor is most appropriate for messages that influence control over the direction of daily activities (Part). The most important messages to impacted employees fall into two categories.

1. **Messages about things: (from the CEO or President)**
 - a. Current situation and rationale for the change (*Purpose*).
 - b. Vision of organization after change takes place (*Picture*).
 - c. The basics of what is changing, how it **will** change, and when it will change (*Plan*).
 - d. The expectation that change will happen and is not a choice.
 - e. Status updates on the implementations of the change, including success stories.
2. **Messages about how the change impacted the employee: (from the Supervisor) (*Part*).**
 - a. Impact of change on the day-to-day activities (WIIFM).
 - b. Implications of change on job security (will I have a job?).
 - c. Specific behaviors and activities expected from the employee, including support of the change.
 - d. Procedures for getting help and assistance during the change.

The 6th Key: Engage Leaders At All Levels

Leaders are not necessarily people who hold a position of authority, they are people who make such an impact that others choose to respond to them. A strategy or an initiative could be well planned out on paper, but if these natural leaders are not engaged they are the very people who could inhibit success.

Leaders exist at all levels of the organization. Leaders who are on the front lines “*excel at seeing things through fresh eyes and at challenging the status quo. They are energetic and seem able to run through, or around, obstacles*” (John Kotter*). If these potential leaders are not given the opportunity to invest their energy in contributing, they may invest their energy in leading a resistance movement simply because they feel that their concerns are not understood and respected.

Part of the trick is to clearly identify the specific level of decision making influence each stakeholder possesses for various types of decisions. People should know whether they are being consulted, have an actual vote in the outcome, can actually veto something their expertise deems inappropriate, or have authority to impose a decision. The [Decision Making Grid](#) is a useful model for this purpose.

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The 7th Key: Demonstrate Respect To Build Trust and Commitment

“No law or ordinance is mightier than understanding”

Plato

Most people admit that in the middle of a disagreement the other person needs to understand. Of course the other person is thinking the same thing. Everyone wants to be understood, but everyone is waiting for the other person to do it first. Making people feel understood is not about making everyone “feels good”, and it does not mean agreeing with them in order to avoid a conflict. You can agree with people and they may still feel misunderstood. You can disagree with people and still make sure they feel understood.

The word, “respect” comes from the Latin, “*re-spectare*,” which has the same root as spectacles or perspective. *Spectare* means, “to look.” Respect literally means to step out of your own perspective and consider something from another person’s viewpoint. But that doesn’t mean one must agree in order to help others feel respected. This is what employees want from their leaders. They want to know a leader fully understands and has factored in their concerns when developing goals, objectives, and strategies. People are more willing to accept something they disagree with if they feel understood. But they won’t even accept agreement if they feel misunderstood.

The 8th Key: Get Tools In Your Toolbelt

Balancing authority and collaboration is easier said than done. Every leader needs as many tools as he or she can get to manage the unconscious habits we each have that trigger people’s habitual resistance to authority. This relates to not the least among Stephen Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: “Sharpen the saw.”

These essential tools include technical methodologies, organizational tools, planning processes, communication and negotiation techniques, and habits to balance and renew your resources, energy, and health to create a sustainable, long-term, effective lifestyle. Effective leadership involves a lifetime of continuous learning. We need all the help we can get.

Articles in the [expanded leadership series](#) present various decision-making models and communication techniques for improving one-to-one communication and for facilitating respectful, collaborative behavior in groups. Woven throughout the series is a unique perspective on the relationship between *respect* and *understanding*, and how these relate to basic principles of gaining leverage in the martial arts and in communication.

The ultimate objective of using these techniques is to establish a work environment in which everyone feels safe to disagree so that communication is more open and work is more productive.



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* Resources

[Leadership Development: How to Get the Results You Need](#) by Haslam and Pennington.

[Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership](#) by Haslam and Pennington.

Kotter, John P. (2003). [The Power of Feelings, An Interview with John P. Kotter](#), Leader to Leader, No. 27, Winter 2003.

Bridges, W., & Mitchell, S. (2000). [Leading Transition: A New Model for Change](#). Leader to Leader, No. 16, Spring 2000.

Hall, G. E., Wallace, R. C., & Dossett, W. A. (1973). [A developmental conceptualization of the adoption process within educational institutions](#) (Rep. No. 3006). Austin, Texas: The University of Texas at Austin, The Research and Development Center for Teacher Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED 095 126).

Rob Pennington and Stephen Haslam work with leaders and managers. Find out more at Resource International, www.resource-i.com.