

Self-Deception: The First Explanation

Will Schutz

Alfred operates one of the most beautiful and successful resort hotels in the country.

"Empowerment is our major problem," he tells me earnestly. "Middle managers are reluctant to make decisions for themselves."

"Why don't we start by looking at your leadership team?" I suggest. "Do they feel empowered?"

He looks surprised. "I'm not sure. Why don't you interview them and find out?"

"Are you kidding?" the senior managers say. "We meet endlessly and never come to any conclusions. People just wait until after the meeting, then go see Alfred and get a decision from him, hoping they can influence him."

I report this reaction to Alfred, a very thoughtful man. "You know, maybe I don't want empowerment," he muses. "Empowerment means giving real power, doesn't it—power to make final decisions. Hmmm..."

Almost every organization I have ever worked with claims to place a high value on empowerment. Almost none really means it. Most executives who talk about empowerment envision a form of participative management: "I want participation from everyone, open doors, frequent meetings, suggestion boxes, agreed-upon proposals. After all that, I'll decide. Most of the time I may do it your way, but I will decide which times."

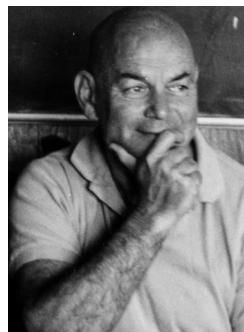
This is not necessarily a poor procedure, it simply isn't empowerment. Empowerment means that I, an

employee, have the authority to make or co-make the final decision. "Co-make" means I have veto power over any decision I don't like. Further, I am not truly empowered if I agree with a decision for fear of retaliation or some other unpleasant consequence. When I agree, my agreement must be honest.

Self-deception is a frequent cause of bafflingly contrary results

Similar case: Executives of a large food company said they wanted to increase risk-taking and creativity in the organization. Their researchers hadn't come up with any new ideas in years. Again I began by interviewing some of the workers. "Are you serious?" they asked when I explained my mission. "Anyone would be a fool to take a risk around here or to suggest something new," they insisted. "You should have seen what happened to the last risk taker."

I returned the next day to talk about creativity to the top-management team. "Would you all do me a favor before we begin I asked. "Please shut your eyes and say the first thing that comes into your head when I say



Will Schutz (1925-2002), creator of The Human Element, FIRO® theory and the Elements of Awareness.

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the word...‘creative.’” The responses were immediate: “Beard, sandals, dirty, unreliable, late reports, never there when you want him...”

Now, how about the word “uncreative,” I asked. Again, the responses came easily: “Neat, on time, prompt reports, reliable...”

“Now, how many of you want more creative people in your department?” Silence.

“Maybe we really don’t want more creativity,” mused the CEO, noting the unanimity of the response.

It’s not that empowerment and creativity are good or bad. The point is that if things aren’t going the way I want them to, it may be that I don’t really want them to go that way. The culprit is self-deception.

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Self-deception is a frequent cause of bafflingly contrary results. If publicly, I am an empowerment champion who is not aware of my internal feelings, I will inevitably be dismayed that I don’t get what I want. The truth is, I don’t really want empowerment, but I have fooled myself into taking a public stand that reflects what I would like to believe or how I want to be seen or what is popular and up-to-date.

Once I become aware of my real feelings—of what I honestly believe or want—I am free to make a conscious choice. I can espouse a modification of empowerment, abandon it altogether, or bring myself around to believing in it for real. No matter which course I choose, my chances of seeing my wishes fulfilled rise tremendously when my feelings are congruent with my public beliefs and values.

To be sure, becoming aware of my self-deception does not prevent me from assigning blame elsewhere. If I wish, I may continue to blame: the irresponsibility of youthful employees, the softness of modern child-rearing, the economy, the administration’s money policy, top management, middle management, and anything else that could be responsible for my failure to produce empowerment or creativity or whatever. To some degree I will even be right to blame such factors, since each does play a role.

But if I am ambivalent and unaware of it, I am overlooking a major reason I am not getting what I say I want. So before I look too far outside, I might focus my attention inside.

I can now take a further step of great potency and problem-solving power. If things aren’t happening the way I want them to, I ask myself, without rancor or blame, “What part of me doesn’t really want them to happen that way, and what is my contribution to not getting what I think I want?” As I become more aware of my own complicity in my “failure,” and take responsibility for it, my lens is unclouded and I am free to see more clearly the road to a solution. |