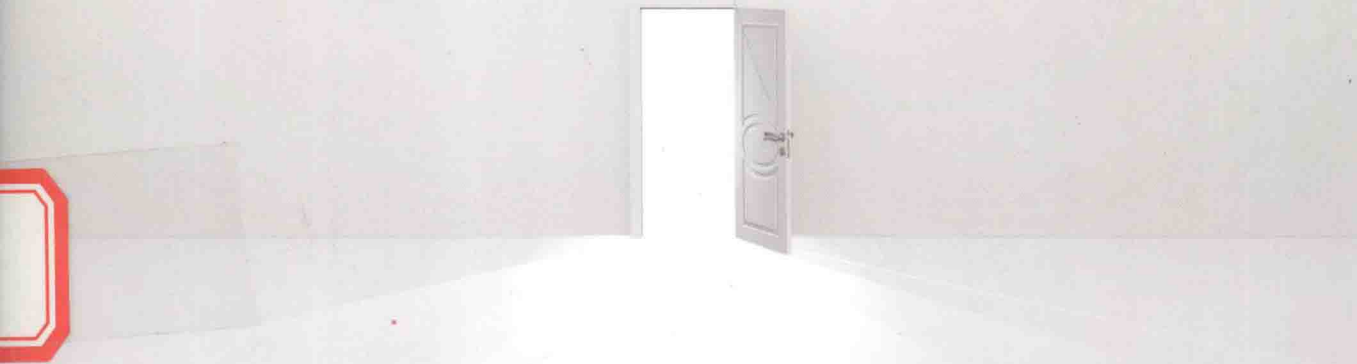


THE EMPOWERED MANAGER

SECOND EDITION

Positive Political Skills at Work

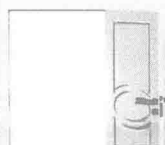


PETER BLOCK

THE EMPOWERED MANAGER

SECOND EDITION

Positive Political Skills at Work



PETER BLOCK

WILEY

Cover image: © iStock.com/bestdesigns

Cover design: Wiley

Copyright © 2017 by Peter Block. All rights reserved.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Block, Peter, author.

Title: The empowered manager : positive political skills at work / Peter Block.

Description: Second Edition. | Hoboken : Wiley, 2016. | Revised edition of the author's *The empowered manager*, 1987. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016033002 (print) | LCCN 2016036814 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781119282402 (hardback) | ISBN 9781119282426 (epdf) |

ISBN 9781119282419 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Organizational behavior. | Organizational effectiveness. |

Office politics. | Executive ability. | BISAC: BUSINESS & ECONOMICS / Organizational Behavior.

Classification: LCC HD58.7 .B58 2016 (print) | LCC HD58.7 (ebook) |

DDC 658.4/095--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016033002>

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ALSO BY PETER BLOCK

The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods, coauthored with John McKnight

An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture, coauthored with Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight

The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters

Community: The Structure of Belonging

Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used

The Flawless Consulting Fieldbook and Companion: A Guide to Understanding Your Expertise

Freedom and Accountability at Work: Applying Philosophic Principles to the Real World, coauthored with Peter Koestenbaum

Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest

*To Peter Koestenbaum, a philosopher become intellectual
entrepreneur and the finest friend the world has known.*

PROLOGUE

TO READ OR NOT TO READ

This opening is designed to help you make a good decision about whether to read this book. Writing a book about organizations is not like writing an international spy thriller. In a spy thriller, you can begin by describing the fog slowly rising off the river separating two Eastern European countries. You can have a train hurtling through the night. In the corner of one compartment are two men, unconscious, one of them clutching a business card with a seven-legged toad embossed in green ink. A woman arrives on the scene, reaches calmly into her purse, and on it goes. In the spy thriller, all of this happens in the first paragraph. You are hooked and off you go, knowing that you have found just the book you were looking for.

Finding a book about organizational life that has meaning for you is not so easy. You shouldn't have to read a hundred pages to decide whether you want to finish such a book. I want to tell you who this book is for, who should not read it, and what to expect in the pages to come.

THE VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

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.

Our concern at the top of an organization is not only that the organization succeeds, but even more, that we leave behind a legacy that ensures strength in the future. To create and leave behind a strong organization requires building a culture in which people take responsibility for themselves and the organization. A culture in which dependency, blaming other groups, taking the safe path, seeking control for its own sake, and acting in self-serving ways are all minimized. That is what this book is about: creating an entrepreneurial spirit where all members of the organization feel responsible for creating a workplace they personally believe in.

Caring about these issues means we see ourselves as forces for change and improvement. It makes us somewhat radical in the midst of a workplace culture where the predominant concerns are safety, advancement, control, and the desire to hold someone else responsible for what is happening. In many ways this book is written for those with a conservative style and a radical heart. The radical heart keeps us focused on a vision of the future, on the opportunity, not the risk, of finding out what is possible. Our radical heart wishes to be practical but is willing to live in the wilderness, with its dangers, and it believes that organizations, as the primary meeting places for human beings, have only begun to reach their potential. Our radical heart, clothed in the company dress uniform of the day, wishes not only for high overall performance but also to work in a place where the best that life has to offer is expressed. If, as a manager, these somewhat idealistic, semi-spiritual, seemingly softheaded ideas have meaning for you, then you have found the right book.

THE VIEW FROM THE BOILER ROOM

For those of us who work for a living and are somewhere in the middle, my intent is to offer both a specific mind-set and practical ways to support the belief that we have some control over our destiny.

Working in the middle of an organization creates certain predictable dilemmas for each of us. The most difficult struggle is between serving our personal ambition to get ahead and, at the same time, doing work that has personal meaning in a way that maintains our integrity and optimism. It is easy and seductive at times to experience a sense of pessimism that the organization will ever become the kind of place we wish it to be. It often seems that other people are driving the business, not us, and that our survival is, in fact, in someone else's hands. How do we go about changing a culture that involves thousands of people, most of whom, from a distance, seem quite satisfied with things the way they are?

The promise of this book is that it holds an antidote to the malaise of predictability and control and the isolation they incur. Within each of us is the ability to create an organization of our own choosing. When we believe that, it is good for us and good for the organization. That belief—that it is possible for me to create a place I believe in, even in the midst of a group of automatons, an empty desert, or a risky marketplace—is the entrepreneurial spirit. It is the key to being political in a positive way and having the strength to avoid the manipulative choreography we see going on around us.

This book is for any of us who feel that most organizations are still venues to discover what is possible. Our belief is that organizations are successful sometimes despite the way they manage themselves. We know that if we are going to spend the best days of our lives at work, work ought to be more than a job—and it is up to us to push the limits, regardless of our position. The desire for change, the search for better ways to handle what seem to be unsolvable problems, the wish to create something that carries our personal and collective stamp, all grow out of feelings of dissatisfaction, restlessness, and suffering. This book is designed to scratch the itch created by both uneasiness and hope.

SORRY, WRONG NUMBER

You, however, may view things very differently. You may feel very strongly that your organization is, in fact, currently a living example

of your own deepest beliefs. You may feel that it operates well enough, that it achieves its goals, and that what is needed is more of the same. You may be an advocate for clearer goals, better structure, and more willingness on the part of people to make sacrifices and to return to a set of values that seem to have existed in the past. You may long for greater respect for authority, a greater willingness to postpone gratification, and an understanding that work is work and is not meant to be the carrying vessel for life's wishes and dreams and values. You may feel that one's personal life and community life are the places for self-expression and individuality. You may argue at times that many of the jobs in today's organizations, by their nature, are intrinsically repetitive and hold no promise for meaning or great satisfaction. If these statements ring true, if you are essentially satisfied with how your organization operates and believe that the best hope for the future is an improved version of the present, then this book may not be for you.

WHAT TO EXPECT

My intent is to offer a mix of philosophy and practicality. If you have read even this far, you have encountered most of the philosophy behind the book. Some of the more practical ways this book might be useful relate to the basic goal of developing some control over our own destiny even though we are in the middle of the organization. The book outlines specific ways to:

- Clearly see the pressures on us to be fast, cautious, safe, and compliant (Chapters 2 and 3).
- Formulate contracts with our subordinates, peers, and bosses that encourage responsibility, interdependence, self-expression, and commitment (Chapter 4).
- Create a vision of the future for our unit that embodies our deepest personal beliefs about individuals and organizations (Chapter 5).

- Develop high-integrity strategies for dealing with adversaries, fence sitters, and opponents as well as allies (Chapter 6).
- Resolve within ourselves our own wish to be dependent and taken care of, and replace this in a way that honors our interdependence (Chapter 7).
- Discover the courage to do what needs to be done for ourselves and the organization (Chapter 8).
- Develop a strategy for change that we can control (Chapter 9).

Woven throughout the book are two additional themes:

1. Ways to not only claim our own autonomy regardless of the expectations of others, but also to sustain our interdependence with peers even if they don't seem interested.
2. Ways to develop specific methods for handling meetings, restructuring our units, managing communications, and developing other processes that align with our wish for how the organization should operate.

Empowerment is not a set of techniques. It is a choice, not a tool. If you fundamentally believe that leadership, direction, and control are best exercised at the top of our institutions and our society, then just say no to empowerment. Be the best parent you can be. Don't create expectations of partnership that ultimately you will not fulfill. Do you choose to move down the path of self-management? Is this a business strategy you believe in? If so, then over time you continually seek more and more ways to shift responsibility and control to the people doing the core work of the organization.

WHAT NEXT

Each time you begin to bring empowerment ideas into your work situation, as you give your employees more and more freedom, expect a very mixed response. There is a part of each of us that does not

want more autonomy, choice, or responsibility. We want to be taken care of. We like the patriarchal contract. We want our bosses to be good parents. Choosing ownership, agency, and partnership means giving up safety. None of us gives up safety gracefully. Claiming freedom and autonomy means sacrificing innocence and security. This is the transformation we are moving through; it is difficult and demanding, and it triggers deep ambivalence.

We pursue the ideas of empowerment and partnership as the means for saving and renewing ourselves and our businesses, not because our people are clamoring for them. We hope that, over time, most of us will choose freedom and the responsibility that goes with it. The success organizations have had in employee involvement, self-management, quality through participation, and other similar efforts affirms this.

The starting point, though, is always a willful act of leadership, at whatever level you find yourself. Each of us can make a decision to engage in partnership almost independent of the responses of others or the short-term consequences.

—Peter Block
Cincinnati, Ohio

INTRODUCTION

WHY EMPOWERMENT NOW AND AGAIN

The first version of this book was written in 1987.

It was a time of crisis for U.S. industry. In the early 1980s, Ford Motor Company set an all-time record for losses by a major U.S. corporation. Harley-Davidson was three months from bankruptcy. The Japanese were producing quality products; the United States was not. It was a time of recession, financial crises, and growing unemployment.

One response to these difficulties was to focus on improving the quality of U.S. products and services. The quality movement accelerated and one dimension of that wave was that organizations began to look to their employees to improve the products and services. Quality control had traditionally been a staff function, meaning third parties examined the output of line workers to make sure they achieved quality standards.

A shift in thinking was needed. The shift—initiated by experts like Edwards Deming, Tom Peters, the Association for Quality and Participation, and many more—put quality in the hands of the workers. This gave rise to Quality Circles, Employee Involvement, Participative Management, Team Building, and Sociotechnical Systems. These approaches had one thing in common: They believed that the lower level employees, with some support from above, had the ability to right the ship. The idea of engaging line people close to the work was the centerpiece of the economic recovery. It worked. U.S. companies emerged from their low point

and, as iconic examples, Ford Motor Company made an enormous recovery, and Harley-Davidson became profitable again and achieved one of the strongest brand loyalties in the world, much of it based on the employee-created quality of the product.

This was the context out of which the first edition of *The Empowered Manager* was written. The book validated the shift in control from top management to people closer to the work. It offered an alternative to the patriarchal leadership beliefs that achieved dominance with the rise of the industrial era. Before the book, the word *empowerment* was rarely used in a workplace setting. As the book was published, the idea was becoming popular as a way of capturing what was already occurring in the most progressive, and desperate, organizations.

Like many social movements, empowerment had its moment in the sun, from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s. The idea became popular, it was widely adopted, and business enterprises, government agencies, schools, hospitals, and other organizations listed empowerment as one of their core values. Whether the adopters believed in it or not, empowerment became part of the mainstream narrative.

That era has passed. As organizations began to believe the quality of their products and services was competitive, and the U.S. economy was solid again, the attention turned from best utilization of people to dominating markets and reducing the cost of labor. The top leaders, who were once chosen from marketing and manufacturing, then were chosen from finance.

So, why reintroduce the ideas of empowerment almost 30 years later?

The world is a different place now.

Markets have changed and become global. Technology has transformed the workplace. We work long distance and at home. Many functions that were once embedded in our institutions have been outsourced. We live in the romance of disruption, where whole industries are being turned on their heads. I rent my bedroom to a stranger and put a dent in the hotel business; I rent my car through Uber and Lyft and dent the taxi industry; I mortgage my house

online and dent the bank; I shop online and my neighborhood stores are gone. My contact list, news, facts to be checked, and what my friends had for dinner tonight are all in my pocket, on my smartphone.

This market and business revolution determines how we manage and organize organizations that can be successful in adapting to all of this change. It has produced increasing pressure to cut costs, reduce labor costs, merge functions and institutions, and commodify our relationships with employees. In fact, they are no longer called employees; they are talent. Human Resources has become Talent Management.

Smaller, leaner, faster, agile mantras drive most work cultures. Business is now about the money. Government is now about lowering costs and privatizing as much as you can. Schools seeking reform are now about more technology, better measurement, standardized curricula, and racing to the top. Hospitals are growing into empires.

Customer service, a major calling card for the 1980s, has now mostly been automated. Every organization is driving us to contact them online, and the largest continuous concert in the country occurs while we wait for a human being to answer our 1-800 calls. The depersonalization of service has gone so far that some organizations advertise proudly that if you call *them*, a human being will talk to you. Just providing an actual person, to pick up the call sooner, is now a competitive advantage.

With all that has changed—with this culture increasingly enamored with convenience and speed, artificial intelligence, robots, online everything, and frictionless (meaning no humans) transactions—where is the employee now? Are employees even really needed now?

People are needed. And how we lead and manage them still matters, just perhaps not as much, and not in the same way. Michael Levie, who runs the CitizenM contemporary hotel chain, has an interesting slant on the place of people in a technologic age. He is investing in as much technology as possible in his hotels. Automatic kiosk check-in, iPads in the rooms so guests have one-touch control of the environment, including draperies, sound, TV, lighting,

communication, and even what kind of art they would like on the wall. There is also extensive electronic monitoring so management can track hotel operations: how clean a room is, when it was cleaned, how long it took to clean it, the lighting, the food preparation, labor scheduling, the customers' TV and temperature preferences. Everything except what customers do in the room.

Here is the point: Levie says that all the technology serves to unburden the hotel employees from many of the repetitive functions of running a property in order to free them to maximize positive experiences for hotel guests. The idea is that if the hotels create a satisfying work environment for staff, they eventually have a similar impact on their suppliers. In other words, if the staff experience is satisfying, the customer experience will follow suit. Therefore his goal is to make jobs fun and interesting. Every morning the staff has a meeting to decide who will do what that day. Each member of the staff (they are called ambassadors) becomes trained in all functions: reception, room management, food and beverage service, bartending, group sales, and bookings. There is one specialist in the house: the maintenance person. The rest of the ambassadors get what we used to call job enrichment—and what we might now call empowerment. And it works. Turnover is one-third the industry average, and recruiting is a buyer's market.

The meaning of this is that no matter what realities work to make employees less important, or redundant, or temporary, or more marginal, there is always an opportunity and a need to create a culture that positively impacts performance, builds accountability, and is rewarding for everyone in the food chain, executives included.

The answer to the question of why empowerment and why now is that there is the need to organize human effort, despite any disturbance to the surface waters by radical innovation, modern tectonic shifts, technological innovation, marketplace expansions and contractions, cultural volatility, and all the science we can finance that is determined to replicate human beings and thereby replace us. There is a persistent requirement to care for the human being, even as they make themselves obsolete.

As managers, we hold a set of assumptions and beliefs about what makes for a productive and purposeful human system. These assumptions revolve around how much choice and control and value to give to people in an organized work setting, all of which are decisive in determining the nature of our workplace. And what is striking after a longish view of the workplace landscape over four decades is that the beliefs about organizing human effort have seen little change.

Most of our organizations are still functioning as though people were commodities and just another form of asset. Our contemporary organizations still believe that the vision comes from the top. That talent has to be carefully managed. That pay systems drive performance. That what you measure is what you get and that the future needs to have a blueprint (despite the popularity of Scrum, which is trying to shift that thinking).

This way of thinking is the cornerstone of the patriarchal mind-set, which is detailed in this book. Patriarchy holds that the leader, at the top, is foundational to success—the more heroic, the better. When you read about amazing companies and amazingly successful and sexy companies, like Zappos, Google, Tom's Shoes, Apple, and Facebook, what you read about is the founder.

The alternative is a partnership or entrepreneurial mind-set, which is the point of this book. Partnership is about placing choice and control close to the work, close to the customer, close to the student, close to the patient, and in the hands of people who do the work. It is not about style, or gourmet food in the cafeteria, or pets in the workspace, or any other engaging and exuberant forms of workplace culture. These are good things. Every workplace should be appealing, welcoming, and playful.

The effect of style, however, can mask the reality of today's workplace.

- One person now does the job that two or three used to do. This is the inevitable impact of mergers, contractions, and consolidation. Every acquisition is financed by reducing the number of employees. Wealth to the investors, vulnerability to the

employee. It is called eliminating waste and creating efficiencies. We constantly ask people to do more with less. Part of this trend is to outsource as many jobs as possible. It reduces benefit costs and avoids all kinds of liabilities facing employers.

- There is constant investment in technology to more closely monitor employees. Truckers are now monitored on how many hours they drive, how much rest they take, and where they are on the route. The computers of work-at-home employees are monitored for every hour they are used for work. If you are an office worker, they are collecting data on how you spend your time and where you browse on your computer.
- The 40-hour workweek has disappeared, except in low-wage jobs. The smartphone is the modern shackle. People paid on salary are on call, like physicians, expected to answer a text or e-mail in a timely manner. Even if this is not policy, it is a ringworm in the mind of every employee.
- People at the top of organizations are more celebrated than ever. Business leaders are our cultural icons, regardless of how we whine about their wealth. It is no accident that making a lot of money in business is a key qualification to run for public office. Nothing wrong with this; it just exemplifies the permanence of our adoration of top management.
- Finally, and this is most telling, people seem as afraid about the stability of their jobs and how their bosses feel about them as they were 35 years ago. If our leadership and management thinking had shifted along with all the material changes in the world, there would be a chance people would feel more secure and connected despite it all.

All of this reality calls for a shift in thinking. A shift in mind-set and a commitment to build a sense of partnership and purpose with people at all levels at work. When we believe we have more control over our work, when we are participants in defining vision and purpose, when we operationally are better connected to our peers and other departments, our organizations simply perform better. This