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Creative Meetings through Power Sharing

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As originally published in the *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1972.

Dialogues among persons, where there is a superior-subordinate relationship, are usually characterized by an implicit recognition of the superior's authority. Whether or not he exercises that authority, all present are aware that the superior can reward or punish their actions. So, rather than speaking freely and frankly, the subordinates become conditioned to participating in a manner calculated to win his approval. The author examines the dynamics of meetings, showing how the behavior of participants can stifle initiative and inhibit the free exchange of ideas. He suggests a different approach, in which managers spur the expression of constructive ideas by sharing their power and acting as collaborators with their subordinates.

Meetings are obviously an important part of a manager's life. In face-to-face encounters with one or more of his subordinates or peers, problems are brought up, information is shared, presentations are made, new ideas are developed, and, often, decisions are made.

One would think that meetings are an exciting and rewarding component of business life. But this is the case far too seldom. Most meetings are notable for hidden agendas, lack of candor, and waste of talent. This produces a high level of frustration and boredom for participants and a low level of accomplishment, both for the company and for those persons present.

One reason why meetings so often seem to accomplish so little – and by "meeting" I am thinking particularly of a gathering involving two or more persons where there is a superior-subordinate relationship – is that those present never forget that the organization's system of reward and punishment is still operating. To put it more precisely, the manager (the superior) does not let them forget.

Most managers operate with a style that I call judgmental. It is characterized by an emphasis on the power and right of the manager to pass judgment on actions of his subordinates.

The manager may keep hands off as subordinates prepare proposals for presentation to him. Such useful devices as delegation of authority, management by objectives, and participative management attempt to augment the autonomy of the subordinate, but meaningful decisions are usually reserved to managers well up the corporate ladder. In fact, one's right to make important decisions is the single most telling measure of status and power.

As a result, there is heavy emphasis on getting and guarding the power to decide important issues. This view of power as the right to make decisions about and comment more or less freely on actions, ideas, and proposals of subordinates puts the manager in a judgmental posture.

But as a judgmental manager he places himself in a difficult situation: if he maintains detachment in order to be fair to his subordinates, he removes himself somewhat from the action. On the other hand, if he uses his experience and skills in the usual way to involve himself in the discussion leading up to the decision to be made, he becomes a partisan. Then he is competing with his subordinates rather than playing his superior

role as a manager / decision maker. In either case, much of the satisfaction of cooperative accomplishment is denied him.

In practice, the manager often walks a devious middle path. He uses persuasion and informal rewards and punishments to lead his subordinates to propose only what he can decide on favorably. But they resent his manipulation of them if they realize it. The result is misunderstanding and suspicion that make wholehearted cooperation difficult.

In my view, there is a better way of dealing with subordinates in order to obtain cooperation and further the organization's goals. But the better way cannot be imposed from above; it requires a collaborative effort between superiors and subordinates. I shall describe an approach to establishing a climate that encourages new ideas and innovation.

Conditioned Responses

An organization's informal reward and punishment system is less visible than the formal one of salaries, bonuses, and promotions, but no less real. It is based on the tacit dependence of subordinate on superior. Each subordinate must often – perhaps several times a day – try to guess what action will be acceptable to his manager. To win acceptance rather than suffer rejection, he soon becomes conditioned to anticipating how his boss will react to an idea or a proposal.

On the face of it, this appears to be a good way for a subordinate to learn how to perform well in his job. In fact, it has a quite different effect, because it stifles initiative and leads to organizational inertia. This condition can create rather ludicrous situations, such as this case:

- The marketing vice president of a company was asked why he did not make himself more available to his sales managers, so that they could benefit from his considerable talent and experience. "The problem is," he said, "that they listen to me too hard. For instance, I'll be just speculating that a red can might increase shelf visibility and suddenly the cans *are* red."

Nearly every manager will deny that he conditions his subordinates. But he should ask himself whether *his* manager lets him forget the superior-subordinate relationship and his explicit power to pass judgment on ideas and recommendations presented to him.

Let me make it clear that I believe controls and guidance to be appropriate and necessary. What concerns me is the destructive conditioning that pervades our organizational climate.

The hierarchical organization makes such apparent sense and has been so productive that it is hard to recognize the destructiveness of this manipulative force. But talk candidly to younger managers and you will observe that they – and, increasingly, older managers too – are very vocal in their frustration over the "Mickey Mouse" methods that corporations employ in the name of efficiency and the welfare of the organization.

Rejection and Approval

If you could watch and listen to video and sound tapes of business meetings, you would note the pervasiveness of the judgmental managerial style in corporate life. In watching and listening to hundreds of these tapes over many years, I have been impressed again and again by these observations:

- Even mild rejection has a significant negative effect on people.
- Pointing out flaws in the ideas and actions of others occupies much of the time.
- Approval has a positive effect on people and creates a climate for resolution of the problem.

In this section I shall discuss these phenomena in terms of business meetings.

Effects of Rejection

There is a widespread belief that in maturity one learns to take the slings and arrows of fortune with equanimity. And to some extent this is true. As one matures, he becomes more philosophical and learns to keep in perspective the daily ups and downs that occur.

One also learns to conceal his true feelings from others. While hurt feelings may not surface at all, more often they are translated unconsciously into uncooperative or even aggressive behavior aimed at the person who has stepped on one's toes. In a meeting, such action is usually disguised as a rational and potentially useful contribution to the dialogue. It is considered mature to view such behavior in this light, so it is easy to forget how sensitive to rejection mature people are.

Let us study the effects of rejection by dissecting the interaction that takes place at a meeting. (To illustrate more clearly my points about rejection and acceptance, I shall not include a superior-subordinate relationship here, but in a later vignette.) Let us suppose a group of four is working to improve one of their company's products, the familiar director's chair, which consists of a wooden frame and two slings.

- **Mr. First:** Let's replace the canvas with nylon.

This is an **offer**. Its chief characteristics are that it contains information and/or sometimes an idea. More important for our purposes, the person who makes it gets a feeling of worth and satisfaction from it.

- **Mr. Second:** I think that's a good idea because it will give us better weathering characteristics.

This is an **acceptance**. It conveys credit and approval to the offerer and gives a reason why the idea merits approval. The originator of an acceptance tends to get pleasure from this action. In addition, the acceptance reinforces Mr. First's feeling of worth and satisfaction. He also views Mr. Second as an ally and a man of taste and perception – a person to pay attention to.

- **Mr. Third:** Will nylon take the bright dyes that we use?

This is a **query**, and it is a slippery, chameleon-like element. A friendly query is perceived by Mr. First, the offerer, as clearly seeking information. He sifts words, tone, and nonverbal signals to determine whether this is a friendly query. If he perceives it to be so, he retains his positive feelings and speculates comfortably and openly with Mr. Third. If, however, he considers the query unfriendly, it constitutes a **rejection** and he reacts defensively or perhaps aggressively. Participants in a dialogue often use questions to make an offerer either defend his contribution or see the folly of it.

- **Mr. Fourth:** That's a good idea, first, but nylon will stretch much more than canvas and the user will hit the supports.

This is another kind of rejection. What appears at the start to be an acceptance proves to be just sugarcoating of the pill. The chief characteristic of a rejection is its negativeness. Regardless of how politely conveyed and how factually accurate and even necessary this negative informatory is, the offerer perceives it as a put-down. His sense of worth and satisfaction is injured.

The feelings of the rejecter are mixed. Even if the information he offers in support of his rejection is important and necessary, the satisfaction of giving it is eroded by the knowledge that he has used his information to put someone else down.

Punishment and Backlash

Nearly everything that happens in conversation can be described in terms of these elements. There are thousands of ways to reject. Through use of the proper (or improper) tone an acceptance or query can be turned into a flat **rejection**. For example, a question such as "Are you seriously suggesting we do that?" is clearly a rejection. The same can be accomplished by a counter suggestion, silence, changing the subject, and countless other actions, many of them nonverbal.

In a meeting of several people, typically about half of the transactions involve rejections. In the rough-and-tumble of the usual discussion, many of the rejections pass unnoticed. If one asks a participant if he perceived some negative action toward him as a rejection, he will nearly always say *no*. We are all thoroughly conditioned to appear to accept rejection, since that is considered to be mature behavior.

Often a participant is unaware that he is hurt and angry over a rejection. But if he is carefully observed, his nonverbal reactions may tell a different story. The signals are faint: an animated face turns into a poker face, the arms cross, or the head jerks backward slightly.

Better evidence may come later, if the rejected offerer tries to justify his offer or pay back his adversary in kind, rather than responding to the substance of the rejection. Let us continue the dialogue.

- **Mr. Fourth:** I have an idea! We could double over this part of the fabric and...
- **Mr. First:** That would increase our costs too much.

Mr. First rejects Mr. Fourth's idea before he can possibly know what Mr. Fourth has in mind.

The most important aspect of a rejection is the transformation of any transaction or exchange from potentially rewarding to punishing. If a manager is unaware of the dynamics of his transactions, he will tend to rely heavily on pointing out flaws or presenting counter suggestions. Both of these are usually perceived as rejections. So the manager is unintentionally punishing and conditioning subordinates to offer ideas or take action very cautiously – if at all.

Pointing out Flaws

In meetings called to attack particular problems, this sequence can be repeatedly observed: one member suggests an idea containing some elements that will help solve the problem. It is not, however, a completely acceptable solution. The manager and the other participants focus on the failings of the idea and firmly point them out. The group discards it to search for a new and better idea.

This series of reactions is considered rational and useful because ideas are judged good and worth pursuing or unhelpful and weeded out quickly. Time is not wasted on ideas that cannot stand up to this early testing.

The flaw in this reasoning has become apparent in an experiment which I have conducted hundreds of times with different groups. Of, say, ten groups working to solve the same difficult problem, nine fail to develop a concept to solve it. The tenth considers an idea discarded by the other nine and is intrigued by it, although it fails to meet some of the specifications of the problem. The group struggles with these shortcomings and somehow, making modifications as it goes along, transforms the bad idea into a good one that meets the specifications.

In analyzing the results of this reiterated experiment, I have pinpointed seven ideas that are regularly weeded out and discarded because they fail the early testing. Yet each of these unacceptable ideas can be transformed into an acceptable solution, and has been by the odd group (about one in ten) that becomes interested in it and struggles cooperatively to overcome its weaknesses.

While watching video tapes of these experiments, I have observed how often members of a group choose to focus on the flaws of an idea rather than on overcoming the flaws. The evidence from one incident, or several, might lead one to conclude, "Pointing out a flaw is the first step in overcoming it." This can, of course, be true. But when, in thousands of incidents, the second step seldom follows, one questions the benign intent behind pointing out a flaw.

One can then identify other evidence that suggests that this behavior serves some other purpose: the tone of voice may be unfriendly and may be accompanied by expressions or gestures that indicate disdain, impatience, or satisfaction in catching the offerer in sloppy thinking. Very seldom does pointing out a flaw convey helpful concern.

What other purpose does it serve? I believe that such behavior is an attempt to exercise power over another person. Implicit is the notion that one's coworkers are adversaries in an unending competition, and that one wins (or at least cuts his losses) by rendering someone else's idea worthless. The manager is not exempt from these feelings. When he is operating with subordinates, however, his stakes are much lower; he can always win.

Climate of Approval

The beginning of improvement in conditions comes when the manager recognizes that for productivity's sake, at least, he must avoid transactions between individuals that arouse defensive or revengeful reactions. Instead, he must establish a climate in which it is appropriate to voice imperfect thoughts and ideas. In this climate all ideas are explored and used by the group. Flaws are dealt with, but as drawbacks to be overcome by everyone.

In my experience, when this climate is present, rejections, unfriendly queries, and pointing-out-a-flaw behavior are practically eliminated. Idea production rises dramatically. Every idea is noted and explored to some extent. According to the participants, they often come out of these meetings feeling exhilarated, pleased with having made worthwhile contributions, and sometimes even personally enriched.

The concrete results of this style of meeting are more difficult to evaluate. The participants consistently rate this type of meeting as more productive and useful than a traditional meeting. But one cannot quantify solutions to problems per meeting; the most important results emerge gradually out of the clarifying effect of disciplined cooperation. These results take the form of more frequent individual and group accomplishment and increased satisfaction and motivation.

The Judicious Manager

Since there are so many drawbacks to judgmental management, why does anyone use this style? I suggested earlier that in our culture there is little apparent choice. Given the heavy emphasis on productivity and profit, it appears that an effective manager must use his power to govern important matters.

Another limiting factor in choice of styles is a lack of models. Among one's teachers, managers, peers, and subordinates, it is difficult to find someone who is not judgmental.

Also, the fact that this style tends to be punishing to subordinates may even reinforce its use. As Walter Nord says, "Punishment is the most widely used technique in our society for behavior control."¹ He goes on to suggest that because punishment immediately stops the undesired response, the punisher is rewarded or reinforced for punishing. If negativeness and pointing out a flaw are seen as punishing, one can understand the manager's attraction to a judgmental posture.

The kind of manager who, in contrast, relies on affirmation and collaboration to get results I call the judicious manager. He holds different assumptions about power, efficiency, roles, and decision making. The contrasting assumptions are summarized in *Exhibit I*. (These propositions owe much to Abraham Maslow, Douglas McGregor, Gordon Lippitt, and the other giants of humanistic psychology.)

Obviously, I am not discussing merely managerial styles, but attitudes toward others and how people interact. People are quite consistent in the ways they act; the strategies one uses in a meeting tend to be the same as those one uses in other situations. For example, a manager who uses humor to try to soften his criticism of ideas and behavior in a meeting probably does the same in any situation where he exercises power over others. A manager who uses questions in meetings to mask his rejections does the same in other contexts.

Changing from a system of informal punishment and rewards is difficult because of the confusions in our present judgmental system. For example, autonomy and cooperation may seem antithetical. In reality they are not. The autonomous person has less need to be defensive and competitive and is therefore free to use his power to appreciate, support, and build on the action or idea of another.

Situations and people are changing continuously. Each of us has bad days, makes mistakes, and some days is less able to cope. Misunderstanding and confusion are an everyday part of this reality. That is why the manager must carry on a continuous clarification of roles and expectations.

Recognize Others' Value

Meetings provide an ideal way of carrying out this mission. The best way of using the meeting to redefine roles and expectations is to tape-record them (video tape is best, if available, but sound tape is satisfactory too). It

¹ "Beyond the Teaching Machine: The Neglected Area of Operant Conditioning in the Theory and Practice of Management / ' *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, Vol. 4, 1969, p. 383

is too difficult to reconstruct the fast action of a meeting without having a tape of it. Later the participants can analyze the tape. Thus each member of the group can take his turn analyzing parts where he made offers.

**EXHIBIT I:
CONTRASTING THE ASSUMPTIONS OF A JUDGMENTAL MANAGER AND A JUDICIOUS MANAGER**

Judgmental Manager	Judicious Manager
The most efficient mode is to have one boss call the shots.	The most efficient mode is to make use cooperatively of the varied talents available.
I must protect my power to make decisions.	The best decision will emerge if I combine my power with that of the implementers.
I decide every course of action where I am authorized to decide.	I enlist my subordinates to devise courses of action, and contribute my thoughts as matters progress.
I must exercise all the autonomy my power permits.	I must use my power to help each subordinate develop his or her autonomy.
I use my power for my own growth.	I share my power so that my subordinates can grow as I grow.
I motivate people.	Accomplishment motivates people. I can provide opportunities for accomplishment.
I review, oversee, and control the efforts of my subordinates.	I use my experience, power, and skill to aid subordinates in accomplishing the task.
I take credit for the results of the groups I manage.	I explicitly recognize the accomplishments of subordinates.
To get results I must spot flaws and have them corrected.	To get results we must help each other overcome flaws.
When subordinates express themselves or act in ways unacceptable to me, I point out the flaws.	When subordinates express themselves or act in unacceptable ways, I assume they had reasons that made sense to them and explore the action from that point of view.
As mature people we are able to "take" put-downs and criticism without destructive consequences.	Even mature people are distressed to some degree by putdowns and criticism, and this makes cooperation difficult.
My role is to define the mission of my group.	My role in mission definition is to facilitate discovery by my subordinates and myself.
My role is to make judgments about the actions of my subordinates while they are carrying out our mission.	My role is to join my subordinates to make sure they succeed.

To illustrate, I shall analyze a simple episode, in which a manager and two subordinates at a food-processing company are discussing how they might reduce shipping costs.

- **Mr. A:** You know, if we decentralize our manufacturing, we could cut shipping costs.
- **Mr. B:** A more practical way would be to get some more competition among our carriers.
- **Manager:** You remember we had a dispute with AA Trucking about eight months ago and got some bids from others. It would be worth examining that possibility again.

The following pluses and minuses can be identified in this exchange:

- + *Plus* – Two different offers were quickly forthcoming.
- + *Plus* – Everyone is focusing on an aspect of the same problem.
- + *Plus* – The manager accepted one.
- *Minus* – Mr. A's offer is rejected when the others **ignore it**.
- *Minus* – Mr. B suggests that Mr. A is not practical.
- *Minus* – The manager puts subordinates in a **competitive, win / lose position**.

The next step is for the group to take each minus, rephrase it as a problem, and come up with a solution.

Let us consider the problem of how to avoid rejection of Mr. A's offer. The manager wants to encourage idea generation, but his action has the opposite effect on Mr. A. Though the manager knows that he should acknowledge every offer and assume that the idea it contains has some value, he gave it short shrift.

Why? From the little evidence we have here, it appears that the manager heard two offers almost at once, which, of course, often happens in meetings. He evidently selected the one that seemed more realistic to him in light of the company's experience. But what seemed to him to be perfectly reasonable action was to Mr. A arbitrary rejection of his idea, without enlightenment as to the manager's grounds.

So we note a discrepancy between the manager's perception of the episode and Mr. A's. Such discrepancies lead to misunderstanding and confusion. The victim wastes energy in speculating about their meaning or, worse, feels resentful and, perhaps unconsciously, determines to "get even."

A useful procedure for avoiding rejections is based on the assumption that an idea made some sort of sense to the person who expressed it – no matter what flaws leaped immediately to the listener's mind. So the burden is on the listener to speculate first about the useful aspects of the idea.

Only after exercising his wit and imagination on the **constructive elements** may he air his concerns or speak of flaws he sees. Even then, if he can word his concerns and flaws as sub-problems to be worked on, he will keep the group's energy focused on building a solution.

Here is how the shipping-cost meeting might go if everyone knew and used this technique:

- **Mr. A:** You know, if we decentralize our manufacturing, we could cut shipping costs.
- **Manager:** Decentralizing would do some nice things for us. It *would* save on shipping and it would give us smaller, faster-moving manufacturing units. Another thing I like about the idea is that it would break up this huge, centralized operation and spread responsibilities in the organization. (*Having acknowledged the value in Mr. A's thinking and revealed some of his values too, the manager shifts to his own concerns.*) I have some problems here to consider – how to decentralize without any capital expense, for one. Another is how to retain both economies of scale and the advantages of small plants.
- **Mr. B:** I have an idea about keeping capital expenses down. We could take a whole packing line and farm it out to someone in the area we want to operate in. We could contract with him to work for us on an exclusive basis.
- **Manager:** Yeah, that would get around the capital problem – we might lease the equipment to a supplier – and it would get us out from under the production problems. It also puts the emphasis on our marketing strengths, where we are superior. But I have a couple of concerns here. How do we persuade the chairman – you know how he loves the production end – and how do we maintain quality control?
- **Mr. A:** What this suggests to me is that we might keep production here and control it as usual – just condense our stews and soups and have reconstituting or repackaging stations at decentralized locations.
- **Manager:** Sure, we could ship the condensed product in tank cars and just decentralize our packaging. I like this line of thought. Perhaps we wouldn't even have to condense if we were using bulk shipping. Now let's see, we have two things to explore, the condense-and-reconstitute idea and the bulk shipment with decentralized packaging. Anyone have any other approaches?

Another way of recognizing value in subordinates and of clarifying expectations is to delegate the decision making to the one who is to be the direct implementer of the undertaking. The purpose of the meeting (or a portion of it) is to provide him with alternatives. The manager must take care to maintain his participatory role and to avoid taking over the decision making. If he has concerns about an alternative being developed, he should state first what is useful in the developing idea and then turn to the problems he sees.

Finally, the subordinate selects among the alternatives. He may select an alternative which the manager considers acceptable but not the best one available. At times like these the manager proves his mettle. Accepting the subordinate's decision is not easy, since he knows that the ultimate responsibility is his. He may be asked by *his* boss to account for the results of a "second best" decision. However, a judicious manager

knows that this is the risk he must repeatedly take if his subordinates are to grow in commitment and autonomy.

In these ways the manager can make a profound change in how he is perceived. He is relying on his experience and wisdom, not to judge and impose the accept-reject alternatives, but to encourage, teach, guide, and capitalize on the powers of his subordinates. He is very much into and a part of the action. Meetings can become a place where there are many rewards for the offering and few punishments.

Concluding Note

Dealing with problems is the everyday job of a manager. By shifting from the judgmental to the judicious mode, the manager frees himself to contribute all his skill, experience, and knowledge without relegating subordinates to the position of lackeys. In doing this, he does not relinquish his responsibilities of guidance and control.

In short, the judicious manager enjoys his job more while he makes a much larger contribution and helps his subordinates do the same.

