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Don't ST*U

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In "The Understated Art of Knowing When to ST*U," by Sgt. Maj. Robert Nelson and retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gabriel Arnold, published May 31, 2022, by the NCO Journal, the authors outline a frank and insightful picture of organizational power and how people within it can avoid being ignored or punished for speaking out of turn. Their article is accurate in that those with little time within an organization, (perceived) competence, personal reputation, or power are unlikely to be listened to, and right that anyone offering an unpopular opinion without those advantages may risk their reputation or career.

My article does not differ on any of those conclusions, and perhaps doesn't necessarily even speak to the same audience. Nelson and Arnold address their article primarily to those with relatively little authority within an organization, mentoring them on how to avoid being crushed. My article addresses leaders and how to build effective organizations. Nelson and Arnold's argument presupposes an authoritarian environment. I argue leaders should not allow one to exist.

How Did We Get Here?

Authoritarianism is a leadership style of obedience and the downplaying of dissent. Psychologist Douglas McGregor gave his definition of the term "Theory X," in his 1960 book *The Human Side of Enterprise*, which states autocratic leadership is the natural conclusion of a workforce that is inherently lazy and unfit to make decisions (McGregor, 2011). I argue this is a deeply undesirable leadership structure. Not only is it demeaning to most of the people in the organization, it is short-sighted and counterproductive, discouraging everyone but the top leadership's genuine commitment to the organization.

Yet, authoritarianism in the military has a logical origin. Humanity's experience with conflict has taught

us even grossly inferior warriors acting in concert can defeat single or loosely organized enemies. Western society lived this evolution as feudal warfare, which was built upon few highly skilled knights and peasant conscripts. It gave way to organized mercenary forces and then to highly drilled, exceptionally large national formations, like the Napoleonic armies. Individual prowess as a warrior became almost irrelevant compared to coordinated military maneuver. Obedience and discipline formed the bedrock of modern formations and, as a logical extension, so did unity of command. On the battlefield, a simple chain of authority meant less confusion and a greater chance of victory (Paret, 1986). Following this line of reasoning, it is not hard to see how authoritarianism, despite its drawbacks, found a home in the military.

U.S. Army Sgt. Levi Hendges (left), attack helicopter maintainer at Katterbach Army Airfield, speaks with Maj. Gen. Todd Royar, commanding general, U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command (AMCOM), Feb. 11, 2022. Royar spoke with Soldiers about concerns and aviation asset management.

And how does an authoritarian organization decide who gets listened to? Nelson and Arnold thoroughly cite leadership thinkers who affirm those with time, reputation, competence, and power probably know best. But I would argue these qualities are not as trustworthy as they seem.

Time in the Organization

Time in an organization does afford individuals superior perspective and subject matter expertise. However, it can also create bureaucratic entrenchment, intellectual lethargy, and obstinacy. Those who hold positions for an extended period can be tempted to think they not only know a way of doing things, but the only way. Indeed, John P. Kotter's *Leading Change* is entirely devoted to methods of countering organizational resistance (including resistance spawned from *this is how we've always done things*) (Kotter, 2012).

Unchecked, this mindset can fossilize into the logical fallacy of "appeal to experience," where "old timers" (quoting Nelson and Arnold), base their authority on long service and its implication of competence, though not necessarily competence itself (Paul & Elder, 2004).

(Perceived) Competence

Competence is of paramount importance to any organization, and those with the best ideas should be listened to. However, I've added the word perceived because this most important of traits is sometimes hard to discern. As Nelson and Arnold state, "Competence is often explicitly linked to one's participation and reputation *rather than one's actual ability*" (emphasis mine).

People often reckon competence not from direct observation but from the presence of other, more observable traits, such as time, reputation, and power (but one could also name attractiveness, charisma, confidence, and physical fitness). However, basing competence on these traits is treacherous ground because it gives objectivity a back seat, lending credence to ideas made by the established, even if the ideas are bad, and withholding it from those who are not (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011).

Reputation

Reputation is perhaps the most precarious of bases for deciding who should be listened to. According to leadership author and veteran Emily Bennington, reputation includes the answers to questions like, "Who is she? Do I like her? Is she capable? And can she lead a team?" (Goudreau, 2013). When the answers to these questions are derived from personal or at least substantive observation, they are solid grounds for judging a reputation.

However, answers to those kinds of questions are frequently subjective and, worse, gathered by word-of-mouth. This can lead to misappraisals of which ideas are good and which are not. Worse, reputations can be made (and unmade) without even meeting the individual in question, reducing to a matter of gossip who gets listened to.

Power

Finally, there is the greatest of determiners in an authoritarian organization: power. Quoting Nelson and Arnold, "If someone is new to an organization but is in a position of significant power, like a commanding officer or command sergeant major … he or she can speak up

and share ideas contrary to the accepted practices. However … if you are in a middle management role or below, and thus lower on the positional power spectrum, speaking up … can be detrimental to your career" (2022, para. 4). They continue elsewhere, "Power makes you 'always right.'"

Blindly trusting power can be a mistake and is a logically flawed argument named "appeal to authority" (Paul & Elder, 2004). For example, Lt. Col. George A. Custer had a great deal of power as commander of the 7th Cavalry Regiment at the Battle of Little Bighorn. On June 25, 1876, he believed enemy scouts had compromised his position and ordered a premature attack on a large contingent of Sioux and Cheyenne. Custer thought his foes had no will for combat and would escape, but he was wrong. The enemy stood and fought, and Custer's troopers were slaughtered in one of the U.S. Army's greatest defeats of the Indian Wars. According to the authoritarianism described above, Custer was right in the sense that his power made his decisions unquestionable; however, his rightness resulted in his death and the death of his men (Philbrook, 2011).

The Problem with Authoritarianism

Nelson and Arnold wrote a great article, and I commend them for their forthrightness and honesty. As individuals, there are many, many times when each of us should ST*U. My problem is not with holding one's tongue, it is with accepting authoritarianism. Even under a great leader, authoritarianism is particularly subject to the dangers of groupthink and uncritical thought.

Recent history offers a stark reminder of the dangers of groupthink and the inability to speak up. On May 25, 2020, two rookies and one junior peace officer assisted former trainer and senior policeman Derek Chauvin in arresting George Floyd. Despite the suspect's successful submission, Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for nine minutes and 29 seconds. Junior officers on the team knew this was unnecessary force, and Officer Thomas Lane (in his first week as a full-fledged cop), asked if Floyd shouldn't be turned onto his side. Chauvin, who had time, perceived competence, reputation, and power on his side, refused—and threw the nation into chaos (Hutchinson & Klein, 2022).

Authoritarianism is arrogant and unacceptably risky. It leads people to worry about who has the idea more than if the idea is good. Yet, this leaves a practical question: if you take away time, perceived competence, reputation, and power, how can anyone know who should and should not be listened to? Wisely, Nelson and Arnold point to the answer.

The Solution: Objectivity, Humility, and Leader Disposition

Time, perceived competence, reputation, and power become effective organizational tools when they are backed up by objectivity. By objectivity, I mean results: Do those with greater tenure display deeper wisdom? Do people perceived as more competent produce more? Do those with better reputations live up to them even when there is a cost? Objectivity is what turns time to veterancy, perceived competence to demonstrated ability, reputation to fact, and power to leadership.

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Humility is just as important as objectivity. Authoritarianism opposes humility because the abilities of others threaten it. Nelson and Arnold state this well, "speaking up about flaws in the organization's systems or presenting [ideas] critical of the system can be detrimental to your career" (2022, para. 4). However, no leader, authoritarian or not, is a superhero. All are equally prone to lapses in logic, tunnel vision, inflexibility, and simple error as much as everyone else. Authoritarianism silences the junior voices and the less powerful, regardless of their ideas' validity.

Leader disposition is the key to objectivity and humility. Again, quoting their article, "leaders can decide what ideas are accepted by an organization" (2022, para. 6). While Arnold and Nelson make the above quote in order to show a "disagreeable" leader is more willing to accept change than a "cooperative" one, by virtue of an increased willingness to rock the boat, the point remains that leaders set the tone. An attitude of objectivity and humility undoes authoritarianism without lessening leadership or abolishing responsibility. This, of course, is easier said than done, but I will offer two battle-tested tools that may help.

Until last year (sadly), the U.S. Army housed a relatively little-known organization called the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, a teaching cadre that created the decision making methodology called Red Teaming. Red Teaming, simplified, is groupthink

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mitigation and applied critical thinking.

Groupthink mitigation is "Closely examining group dynamics and actively soliciting and considering ideas and solutions from all group members (without fear of recrimination), [presenting] a fundamental way to break free from groupthink and help make better decisions" (University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G2, 2019, p. 4). Leaders of organizations must take deliberate steps to encourage and value the opinions of others, even the weak and the junior, in order to hear unanticipated ideas and consider the potential warnings of dissenting viewpoints.

A brief example of this is a favorite story of Dr. Kevin Benson's, former director of the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies and Red Team seminar leader. In 2014, the U.S. Air Force uncovered a massive examination cheating scandal among its missileers (company-grade officers entrusted with launching nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles). A gathering of admirals, generals, and senior field grade officers was called together, accompanied by Red Team instructor Steve Rotkoff. Using a technique called *5 Will Get You 25*, which anonymously votes a group's ideas based on their merit, Rotkoff guided the group to an answer that earned a perfect score of 25. Though the officer in charge was urged to preserve anonymity, the admiral wanted to congratulate whoever birthed the good idea. After some hesitation, a junior aide-de-camp admitted he had written the suggestion (that investigators ask company-grade missileers why they felt pressured enough to cheat). The Red Team instructor then pointed out to the crowd that the officer's opinion would never have been considered had the group known who had written it (Brender, 2021).

Applied critical thinking is the deliberate and leader-driven process of "identifying assumptions and biases, deconstructing arguments…, [and generating] and [evaluating] alternatives, thereby increasing our chances of finding the path to success" (University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, 2019, p. 5). It is the removal of as much subjectivity from a decision as possible to make studied, rational, and successful decisions.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism is standard practice in the U.S. military. It is so accepted, in fact, that some of our most experienced and intelligent authors, like Arnold and Nelson, write how-to articles to keep people from being destroyed under its weight. This is a dangerous way to lead a force. We must oppose authoritarianism, listen to as wide a spectrum of ideas as possible and judge them on their objective merit, not on who said them.

The conditions to achieve this mental discipline are set by the leader. His or her actions either reinforce the in-crowd or expand the organization into objectivity, humility, and combat effectiveness. In closing, listen to good ideas no matter where they come from, and don't tell your people to ST*U. ■

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