

# Ideas for Organizations

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Volume 1, Number 3

This is the third in a series of newsletters taken from **Clearing Out the Dust and Cobwebs: Observations on Management, Organizations, and People**. The series contains a number of anecdotes and observations based on the experience of management consultant Bill G. Evans, as recorded by Michael H. Walker.

The anecdotes in this series are grounded in actual experience, and the principles they embody can be applied to management in any sector, public, private, or nonprofit. Each story communicates a simple truth about management. Taken as a whole, they convey an overall management philosophy.

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## Observations About People

Over the years we have made a number of observations about people that have important implications for management.

### The Call

The youngest daughter of one of our senior consultants is an ordained Southern Baptist minister. As you know, there are about as many ordained female Southern Baptist ministers as there are female Catholic priests. Needless to say, when it came time for her ordination, quite a bit of controversy ensued. Indeed, the chairperson of the committee whose job it was to approve her ordination was already on record as opposing female ministers. When this young woman appeared before this group, the chairperson asked her, "Ms. Evans, if we do not approve this ordination, what will you do?" She looked him straight in the eye and responded, "Well, then I will be an unordained minister."

From her perspective she was called by God to do this work and it was the role of this earthly body to confirm, not create, her calling. With or without their blessing she would fulfill the same role.

While we don't feel as strongly about our "call" to be management consultants as Sandi Evans does about her call to be a minister, most of our consultants gravitated to our firm because

they enjoy analyzing organizations and helping them solve problems. Likewise, many of the people who work for clients we serve also have chosen their careers because of what we term "the call."

For example, over the years we have learned that despite the many things police officers and firefighters have in common (they tend to come from blue-collar backgrounds, wear uniforms to work, and face an element of danger on the job), they have completely different callings. Firefighters, unlike police officers, must tolerate a great deal of inactivity in their jobs. In more than 25 years of working with local governments and conducting hundreds of studies of police and fire departments, we never once met a firefighter who had any desire whatsoever to be a police officer. We have also found that lawyers and judges (with notable exceptions) typically make poor managers. Lawyers, after all, go to law school because they want to go to court and try interesting cases, not because they want to manage.

It is important for managers to recognize that, for whatever reasons, employees are "called" to perform one type of activity and not others. Any attempt to fit an employee who has been called to be a "square peg" into a "round hole" job is

doomed to failure, no matter how much attention a manager might focus on this problem. Most efforts to set up consolidated police and fire operations have been less than successful, in part because police officers and firefighters have different callings. In the same way, many successful law practices have full-time professional managers because the partners implicitly recognize that they are “called” to be lawyers, not office managers.

### Accommodators and Enforcers

Our jobs require spending a lot of time on airplanes and in hotels. Over the years we have come to the conclusion that people who work for these service companies may be divided into two categories, accommodators and enforcers. Examples of accommodators are airline people who upgrade you to first class simply because they notice you are a good customer, even if doing so means bending the airline’s rules. They offer you a full can of soda if you look thirsty, not just one of those little plastic glosses. They are the people at hotels who smile a lot and make you feel welcome when you check in. Instead of answering your questions by saying, “I can’t do that,” they always say, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Accommodators do everything in their power to encourage you to fly their airline or stay in their hotel. They will even bend or break rules if it makes sense to do so.

Enforcers, by contrast, raise to the level of an art form making life difficult for customers. If you ask them for help they tell you that what you’re asking “is not their job,” and then they quote you chapter and verse on why the request is against company policy. Or they simply ignore you. They refuse to make exceptions to company policy under any circumstances. They are willing for you to take your business elsewhere rather than bend a rule. You cannot reason with enforcers. Arguing with them is about as likely to produce results as beating your head against the wall.

One of our colleagues had an experience that perfectly illustrates the difference between an accommodator and an enforcer. This colleague had planned for weeks how he would “pop the question” to his girlfriend. His plan was to give her a series of gifts on her birth-

day. Included with each gift was a question related to the gift that had a “yes” or “no” answer. The correct answer to each question was “yes.” The final gift was a tin of popcorn decorated with a man on his knee before a young woman. The question included with the tin of popcorn was, of course, “Will you marry me?” An engagement ring was hidden in the tin. The reason for asking all the questions, our colleague explained, was that he wanted his girlfriend to have some practice saying “yes” before he asked the Big Question.

One of the gifts he had planned to give his girlfriend was a six-foot-tall replica of a pencil inscribed with a “yes” or “no” question. Two days before his girlfriend’s birthday the pencil arrived. Unfortunately it had been damaged in shipping. He immediately called the store where he bought the pencil, explained his problem, and asked if they could ship him another pencil by Federal Express that afternoon. The woman he spoke with, an enforcer, told him that he was out of luck. It was “company policy” that they couldn’t send out another pencil until the damaged pencil had been returned. Our colleague began to reason with the woman. He understood that they couldn’t give him a refund for the pencil that was damaged. Surely he could order another pencil, have it inscribed, and shipped in time for his girlfriend’s birthday. He explained that he wanted to use the pencil to help him get engaged and that he would really appreciate her help. The enforcer was unmoved. “It will take at least three days to get the pencil inscribed,” she said.

Our colleague began to panic. “What am I going to do?” he cried. “My surprise will be ruined if I don’t give her these gifts on her birthday. I don’t want to wait until her next birthday to get engaged!”

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing I can do to help you,” the enforcer replied and hung up.

After thinking about his situation for a few minutes, our colleague called the store

again. This time an accommodator answered. He explained his situation again and the accommodator replied, "That's no problem. I can handle it for you. It's time for me to go home, but I'll stay a few minutes late and inscribe the pencil. Also, I'll call Federal Express to be sure they come by to pick up the package. By the way, it really doesn't make sense for us to bill you for this since you'll be returning the damaged pencil. I'll just hold on to the invoice for a week and give you a chance to send it back. I'm very sorry that you received damaged merchandise. By the way, I hope your girlfriend says 'Yes'."

If you are in a service-oriented business such as government, make sure you hire accommodators, not enforcers. No matter how good a training program you might have, it is difficult to transform an enforcer into an accommodator. It's much easier to hire accommodators to begin with. If you already employ enforcers you don't need to fire them. Just keep them away from your customers.

### The PFC Syndrome

While serving in the army prior to joining Berkshire Advisors, one of our senior consultants, Bill Evans, served in the 7<sup>th</sup> Division in Korea. Bill was responsible for answering congressional inquiries. One inquiry was sent because the sister of one of the PFCs in the Division had written to her congressional representative to complain that her brother had not repaid a loan she had made him. Bill thought this was a rather strange inquiry to be coming from a congressman's office, until he reviewed the soldier's personnel record. As it turned out the soldier had not been paid for seven months. No wonder he had not been able to repay the load from his sister!

When the incident was investigated, Bill discovered that the army's procedures had been followed to the letter. According to army policy, a person could not be paid unless the yellow copy of his pay voucher had been received from his former unit. Since the soldier's pay voucher was not included within his record, the personnel clerk, in strict compliance with regulations, had wired a request to the soldier's previous station, Fort Benning, Georgia, to get the yellow copy. Fort Benning, it

turned out, had misplaced the voucher. The next step in the army's procedure was to get a blue copy of the pay voucher from the army's finance center in Indianapolis, Indiana. Indianapolis was dutifully notified but reported that it had a backlog of 80,000 unfiled vouchers and did not have time to look for the blue copy for this particular soldier. They said they would put a note in his personnel file to that effect and that when the voucher was filed, they'd send a copy of it. Meanwhile, the soldier went without pay for seven months.

It was not that efforts weren't made to pay this soldier. He had gone to his company clerk, another PFC, to explain the problem. This clerk reviewed the procedure, threw up his hands in frustration and concluded that nothing could be done. A little later the PFC who had not been paid and the company clerk paid a visit to a PFC they knew at Division headquarters. The three of them reviewed the situation and decided they'd just have to wait for the blue voucher to come from Indianapolis. After waiting a while longer, the three of them went to see another PFC, this one in the Division Finance Office. The four of them pondered the situation long and hard but could not figure out how to fix it. The regulations, after all, were quite explicit about what could be done.

During the entire process these PFCs did not want to bring the problem to the attention of the company's First Sergeant or Captain. Nor did they bring up the issue with any higher-ranking officer. When Bill Evans found out about the situation he saw to it that the soldier got his back pay within the hour. Bill recognized that part of his job was deciding when to do things despite what the rules said.

All organizations need rules and regulations. Employees need to be trained to understand them. As part of that training, however, they should also learn what to do if a case comes up that is not covered by the rules, or if following the rules will

produce an unreasonable result. Employees need to be encouraged to think, not just follow rules. At the very least they should be taught to bring problems to the attention of a superior, not just ask another PFC how to deal with a problem.

### Bingo

Following the normal course of events in the army, the Club Officer at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, where Bill Evans was stationed as a young lieutenant, was transferred. As a result, responsibility for organizing recreation fell to another young lieutenant, who happened to be Bill's friend. The first Monday afternoon of the week he took over his new responsibilities, Bill received a desperate call from his friend. He was trying to find someone to call bingo for him, because he had a speech defect.

Bill's first instinct was to reject the request outright. He had never attended the weekly Bingo sessions at the club hall and didn't particularly like the game. His friend sounded so desperate, though, that he didn't have the heart to refuse him. He admitted that he didn't really want to call Bingo but said he would help out on the condition that his friend would promise to try as diligently as he could to find someone else to assume the responsibility. Needless to say, he found no one else, and Bill called Bingo that Wednesday. He continued to do so on a "temporary" basis for three and a half years.

Invariably, during the intermission at each of these weekly sessions someone would come up to Bill and say, "Things are really dragging tonight, so could you pick up the pace a bit?" A little later someone else would grab his arm and say, "We are really having trouble keeping up with you tonight, so could you please slow down?" Likewise, someone would usually ask him to turn up the volume on the loudspeaker right after someone else had asked to turn it down.

At the end of the intermission one Wednesday night as Bill was about to begin a new game,

two people came up to the podium at the same time. One of them asked him to turn up the volume on the loudspeaker: the other asked him to turn it down. Bill looked at the two gentlemen, uncertain what to do. His eyes then strayed to the crowd of people before him, patiently waiting for the game to begin. He decided the only reasonable course of action was to put the matter to a vote. "How many of you think the volume is too loud?" Bill asked. Fifty hands went up. "How many of you think the volume is too low?" Fifty hands went up. "How many of you think the volume is just right?" Nine hundred hands went up. Bill then turned to the two men and said, "Gentlemen, I think you have your answer. Now please take your seats."

In our work for state and local governments, elected officials often tell us they feel paralyzed to do what they think is in the best interests of the citizens they serve. The reason is that they are constantly besieged by requests from special-interest groups. When we hear this, we tell them the Bingo story and suggest that when facing requests from such groups they need to ask themselves, "Does this group represent the fifty or the nine hundred?" It's a good question for managers in any organization to ask when faced with requests from "squeaky wheels," either inside or outside the organization.

Although every Wednesday without fail Bill was asked to turn the loudspeaker up or down or to call faster or slower, not once in the entire three and a half years did anyone ever come up to him and say, "Bill, you know, you always call the Bingo games at just the right speed." Likewise, no one ever told him that he set the volume just right. Nonetheless, whenever Bill put the matter to a vote – as he did on a regular basis after the first vote – the overwhelming "silent majority" in the audience indicated that he was doing a good job.