

# Ideas for Organizations

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This is the sixth 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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## Management Tips and Tidbits

Here are a few tips, techniques, and tidbits of knowledge that we've picked up over the years. Keep them in mind as you manage your organization.

### Saying "Yes"

One of the responsibilities one of our most senior consultants, Bill Evans, had while serving as the Division Adjutant General of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division in Korea was approving hardship discharge requests for soldiers to return home before their enlistment had been completed. Hardship requests would be granted, for example, if the parent of a soldier had become ill and there was no one else available to care for him or her.

Because of Bill's range of responsibilities as Adjutant General and the large number of hardship requests, he delegated the task of reviewing the requests to his staff. He told them to use their judgment in deciding which hardship requests they should grant, giving them full authority to approve any hardship requests they deemed appropriate. Only Bill had the authority to reject a request, however. If an error was made by a subordinate, Bill wanted it to be made to the soldier's benefit.

This approach to delegating authority is useful in many other situations. We've found that delegating the authority to say "yes" encour-

ages subordinates to take a constructive approach to their jobs. They review requests in a positive light instead of trying to find out what is wrong with the request. Delegating authority to say "Yes" encourages employees to be "accommodators" rather than "enforcers."

### Tough Questions

One of the first things we do when beginning a consulting assignment is to hold an introductory meeting with the senior management team of the organization being studied. When studying the police department of a large jurisdiction in New York state, we held one of these initial meetings with the department's command staff. During the meeting, one of the high-ranking officers asked, "What questions are you going to ask when you interview me?" The project director smiled and replied, "We're going to ask you what contribution you make to this organization that justifies your retention on the payroll." He meant the reply as a joke, but no one laughed. A few days later the project director ran into the officer in the hall. He was surprised when the officer stopped, smiled, and said, "You know, I thought about that question you said you were going to ask and I decided it was a pretty good one. So this

morning I put it to everyone who reports to me.”

Perhaps managers should ask this question of all the people who report to them. We’ve found two similar questions to be especially helpful when interviewing candidates for employment. The first one is “In what way has the organization you previously worked for changed because you were there?” The second question is “In what way is this organization going to be different if we hire you?” You might also want to modify these questions a bit and ask them of yourself, even if you are not looking for a job.

### The Persistent Lieutenant

During World War II, an insurance adjuster who was a lieutenant of infantry in the army reserves was called up to active duty. The lieutenant was assigned to an amphibious task force commanded by a Navy Vice Admiral.

The Marine Corps was – and still is – responsible for developing doctrines relating to amphibious warfare. Early in World War II, part of that doctrine required that when army squads, platoons, and companies were deployed in ships, they had to be broken up into “boat teams.” The reason for this was that the landing vehicles didn’t have enough room to hold entire companies, so individual companies had to be broken up. On the other hand, the landing vehicles were bigger than what was necessary to hold an individual squad or platoon. Squads and platoons, therefore, needed to be consolidated to fill all the spaces in the boat. The doctrine also required that when the boats hit the beach the boat teams were to re-form into their original squads, platoons, and companies.

During training exercises the young lieutenant came up with an idea for improving this procedure. He presented the idea to his captain. “I have an idea that will save a lot of lives,” he said. “Wouldn’t it make more sense when we land on the beach to remain in boat teams until the first objective has been achieved? After the beach head is secured we can re-form into squads, platoons, and companies. As it is now, we’ll almost certainly take a lot of casualties while we’re re-forming.

The captain thought this was a good idea, wrote it up, and sent it up to his lieutenant colonel. The lieutenant colonel responded with a scathing reply: “If the War Department needs any ideas from young lieutenants on how to fight amphibious warfare, it will ask for them.”

The young lieutenant was undeterred. While in the officers’ club a couple of nights later, he happened to see the regimental colonel who commanded the lieutenant colonel who had sent the scathing note. He walked up to the colonel and told him about this idea. The colonel was impressed enough to make him the operations officer for a battalion in charge of a training exercise to try out his new idea. The colonel arranged to have Navy and Marine representatives observe. As luck would have it, the representatives were running late, and the exercise went so smoothly that it was over before they arrived. Instead of praising the lieutenant who had organized the exercise, however, they wrote a report criticizing his division for violating approved doctrine.

Once again, the lieutenant remained undeterred. This time he arranged a meeting with the vice admiral himself. The first thing he said was, “Admiral, if you can spare 15 minutes I’ll tell you about an idea that will save a lot of lives.” The admiral listened and organized another training exercise. This time he made sure the Navy and Marine representatives came on time. Two weeks later the young lieutenant’s idea became U.S. military doctrine. It was used throughout World War II, and to our knowledge is still doctrine today.

The story has two heroes. The first, of course is the young lieutenant who had a good idea. Good ideas are a dime a dozen, however. What made this man a hero was his persistence bringing his idea to the light of day despite obstacle after obstacle. The second hero of this story is the vice admiral, who was willing to stake his reputation and personal capi

tal on this idea. He deserves at least fifty percent of the credit.

### The Ideal Wife Syndrome

You may have heard the story about the man who never got married because he was looking for the ideal wife. He finally found her but it didn't do him much good. She was looking for the ideal husband.

When developing job descriptions and recruiting new employees for your organization, don't look for an "ideal wife." Before you begin the recruiting process, ask yourself two questions. First, is there a qualified person in the labor market who is willing to accept the position at the rate of pay you are offering? The second question is, even if the ideal person for the job exists, would he or she be willing to work for your organization? If the answer to either question is no, you will need to rethink how the position should be structured and what compensation you are willing to offer. Looking for the ideal employee may be a waste of time unless yours is an ideal organization. Moreover, asking a less-than-ideal candidate to fill a role defined for the "ideal" employee is not only unfair to the employee but is also likely to mean poor performance and worse-than-expected results.

### Time and Place Utility

A customer came into a pharmacy one afternoon and asked the proprietor how much his widgets cost. "Widgets are \$5.00 a dozen," he replied.

"Jones Pharmacy down the street sells them for \$4.00 a dozen," the customer said. "Why don't you reduce the price?"

"Why don't you just go down the street to buy your widgets?" the proprietor responded.

"Well, Jones Pharmacy is out of them right now," came the reply.

The proprietor didn't miss a beat. "When we're out of widgets," he said, "we sell them for \$3.00 a dozen."

### Ask People Before You Push Them

During one of his stints in the Pentagon prior to joining Berkshire Advisors, one of our senior consultants commuted to work with three fellow army officers. All of them lived in the same neighborhood in Springfield, Virginia.

One day when it snowed heavily, government workers were allowed to go home early. The snow caused the four carpoolers no problems on the main road, but once they got off the main road they got stuck. When there are four your men in a car, getting stuck isn't much of a problem. The commuters easily got their car going again. As they continued on their way they stopped and helped a number of other cars that were stuck. By the time they got close to home, the carpoolers were operating like a well-oiled machine. They would spot a car in trouble, stop, push the stranded car until it was free, and be back on their way in less than 45 seconds.

At the top of a hill just before they got home the commuters spotted another car stuck in a snow band. They jumped out and pushed the car down the hill. At the bottom of the hill the car turned left and immediately got stuck again. At first they couldn't believe that the driver had gotten himself stuck again so soon. Then they noticed that he didn't look too happy. As a matter of fact, he hadn't smiled and waved while being helped like the other drivers had.

"I live at the top of the hill," he told them. "I was trying to turn into my driveway when you guys came and pushed me down the hill."

The moral of this story is simple. Before you start pushing someone, ask if that's the direction he or she wants to go.