

Accountability Without Authority: How to Drive Employees Crazy

Both hands flat on her desk, fingers splayed, Suzi looked up and glared before smiling weakly, in recognition. The last time we had seen her, two years previously, she looked ten years younger. Now, these thin lips and narrowed eyes belonged to a different person. She had lost her laugh . . . and much more. Suzi, and others we have seen before and since, had been dragged through the No Authority Gauntlet – what we call the “NAG syndrome.” Here’s how it’s done: You hand someone a management job, but one *without commensurate management authorities*. In other words, make this person accountable for the work of others, but with no accompanying clout; make sure that this pseudo-manager’s accountability goes on for months or even years. The people “reporting” to the pseudo-manager must also have other managers with other demands, but those other managers must have actual, ordinary managerial authorities (selection, de-selection, performance appraisal, you know; we’ve spelled them out in this quick, free book chapter published by Stanford Press).



These employees may sincerely make commitments to this pseudo-manager, and they may intend to keep those commitments. After all, it will be for a good cause – “quality,” “customer service,” “process improvement,” “safety,” or some such. So, the lip service will come easily and enthusiastically. However, when it’s time to prioritize work, these employees will naturally prioritize the demands of their real managers ahead of those of the pseudo-manager. Thus begins the NAG syndrome.

The Three Stages of the NAG Syndrome

The pseudo-manager will experience the NAG syndrome in three stages:

- 1. Jubilance.* In this initial state, the pseudo-manager is proud to be tackling a task that darn near everyone agrees is terribly important. She is confident that any organizational challenge can be met. Huzzah!
- 2. Doubt.* Lip service and elbow grease seem to be going in different directions. People keep endorsing the pseudo-manager’s task, but follow-through is sporadic.



The pseudo-manager can't understand what's going on, and neither can anyone else. Not enough *leadership*? Not enough *communication*?

3. *Bitterness*. This is the final, crazy, phase. In the face of flaccid cooperation, or even rebellion, the pseudo-manager becomes indignant. Don't these people understand how important this is? Don't they care about the organization? Weren't there promises made?

Cleaving to the importance of her task, like a believer in a land of apostates, the pseudo-manager uses the only authority she has: *nag authority*. She becomes a total pain in the rear – *if* she continues to take her mission seriously. That's the unfairness of it: only pseudo-managers who take their tasks seriously are most affected by the NAG syndrome. Others find a way to bail out.

Slower, Riskier, Costlier

In some organizations, NAG is practically synonymous with project management. A few years ago we conducted research on over 500 project managers and found that a huge contributor to project failure was the NAG syndrome (second only to unclear project goals). The problem is so endemic, that courses are offered to project managers in how to manage without authority. That strikes us as similar to teaching people how to live with malaria, instead of giving them mosquito nets.

“Process management,” likewise, has its share of failures because the “process owner” had no authority. Once the frothy-mouthed corporate enthusiasm dies down and the suit-clad consultants go away, nagging process owners find they cannot enforce the new ERP (or whatever) that cuts across the organization.

Organizations waste millions of dollars this way. Our research has shown that – *best case* – initiatives undertaken by nagging, pseudo-managers takes waaaaaaay longer than initiatives undertaken by managers who have ordinary managerial authority.

Consider: We're talking about one of the REALLY BIG risks to success, and yet it costs *absolutely nothing* to mitigate.

How It All Starts

It isn't a bad guy that usually launches a NAG scenario. Normally, these messes seem logical at the time. For example, you put one bright, articulate person in charge of monitoring some particular process: say, power consumption at various military installations. After awhile, she becomes *the* expert on power consumption at these facilities. At that point, then you say, “Hey, you're the expert on this, how about if you take the lead on decreasing power across all these facilities?” Now, she's not in command of any of these installations. She has no authority over anyone in any of these places, but “Sure,” she says. “I'll be happy to take the lead.” And so she begins her march down the nagging path to nuttiness.



Too often we put faith in the cure called “communication,” or the cure called “leadership.” Because we know that these qualities are *necessary*, we believe them to be *sufficient*. They are sufficient only some of the time. The problem is the failure to distinguish what it takes to obtain occasional cooperation from others within the organization, and the conditions needed to do it all the time. This is the difference between borrowing a cup of sugar from a neighbor and shopping in his pantry. It’s the difference between using your relationships and using them up.

And, finally, we see NAG setups occurring when “everybody agrees” that we “gotta do something” about X. For example, at one telecommunication company where we had worked, we happened to be talking with the “VP of Quality” – as he was packing boxes in his office, preparing to move out. The company and all of its leadership had recognized the need to quickly and dramatically improve quality on a number of fronts. So they had hired a famous quality guru. They had given him leeway to hire a handful of bright young internal consultants, which he had. They had given him an office next to the CEO. And, they had given him a substantial training budget to help get everyone trained on “quality.” But after everyone had been trained, and after all the confetti and hoopla had settled down, quality essentially had gone nowhere.

Standing there in his office, we asked him: “Did you ever have the authorities you needed to do what you came to do – to actually get your peers to change how they operate?”

This bright and charismatic leader glowered a bit at the temerity of the question. Then, taking a deep breath, he said, “No,” and closed his eyes briefly.

The whole company had been in a frenzy over quality. Who would think the VP of Quality would need any clout? Why bother giving him the same sort of authorities that you would give the head of production, sales, shipping, or anything else? Heck, everyone’s so enthusiastic about the cause, why bother with such nits at all?

Because they’re required, that’s all. (Or “requisite,” as management guru Elliott Jaques would have said. Here is a nice summary.)

All these goof-ups occur because they sometimes work. Like a failed gambling strategy, success comes now and then, despite lousy reasoning. That occasional success is just enough encouragement for executives to scrutinize a NAG-stricken pseudo-manager and conclude, “We gotta get someone in here who can lead!” Or, “We all just need to communicate better!”

Curing the NAG

The solution to the problem of unempowered managers is really quite simple: downsize their accountability to match their miniscule authority, or upsize their authorities – *publicly anointing* them (people cannot self-anoint) – to match their accountability. Anything else should leave nagging doubts.

