



Transformational Leadership & Service Podcast

Episode 11 Transcript

Authority

Au-thor-i-ty: power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior

Authority is an interesting and important word, as it applies to an individual's ongoing quest to be a more effective leader. Those of us who aspire to more effective levels of personal and professional leadership need a clear understanding of what the word means practically, as well as literally. Consider Webster's formal definition above, and then consider the two workplace applications which can be fraught with either unexpected problems or untapped potential.

Formal authority: the organizational power that comes with the position that one holds or occupies; being able to ask (or tell) someone to do something and then expecting that it will be done. No matter what job or title we may hold in an organization, all of us have some formal measure of power or authority associated with that position. As is the case with most things, the level of power entrusted to us can either be used or abused, depending on our chosen actions or motivations.

During the course of an average day, every one of us makes dozens of different decisions. Besides the obvious business decisions required of our positions, we also make personal decisions regarding how we will act, speak, think, listen, respond, etc. If we become too enamored with the "power of our positions," it can become very easy to disregard, or overlook entirely, critical input that we might otherwise receive from followers, peers and superiors. Typical "managers" are notorious for this. Their attitude says, "I told them what I wanted them to do. Now it's their responsibility to do it – without asking questions."

Informal authority: the personal influential power that comes as a result of others voluntarily granting their support. On occasion, all of us have encountered individuals who did not have the luxury of the power of a position to fall back on. They may have been assigned to labor in low profile, seemingly insignificant positions. Yet, in some amazing way, they were able to successfully lead others to consistently above average levels of performance. These individuals seemed capable of leading despite their positions and circumstance. How did they do it? How were they able to entice others to voluntarily support them and their actions even though the organizational hierarchy may have been stacked against them?

Simply put, they do so by committing themselves to helping their followers/supporters get the things the followers/supporters can secure for themselves. People voluntarily choose to follow another individual because they ultimately believe this particular individual, their chosen leader, can take them someplace that they would have never been able to reach on their own.

So how can we create such a bond with our followers? Excellent leaders know the answer to that question. They work to know each of their followers as individuals. They ask their opinions. They listen to them. They allow their followers to disagree – even publicly, if necessary. But they always work to ensure that followers benefit in the end. They use their **authority** and their common sense.