

Flies Killed in Action Or How Rank-Based Management Kills Effective Communication and What to Do about It

By Jeffrey S. Nielsen

Author: *The Myth of Leadership: Creating Leaderless Organizations*
(Davies-Black Publishing)

A participant in one of my seminars told the following incredible, but true story. He had served in the military where one of his responsibilities was to write and send weekly reports to company headquarters. One afternoon as he was writing the reports, he was distracted by a lot of pesky flies that were buzzing around his tent. In a matter of minutes, he had squashed, smashed, and smeared dozens of unfortunate flies. Returning to his reports, he had a funny idea. Why not write a new report that counts the number of dead flies. This was his way of slightly rebelling at all the reports and other busy work that he was assigned. He figured that his supervisors at headquarters would either ignore the unidentified and unnecessary report or call him and ask him what it was. So with that in mind, he created a wholly new and pointless report that he simply labeled, The FKIA Report – for flies killed in action. He put down the number of dead flies and sent it off with all the other reports. In fact he did this for a few weeks thinking what a good joke this was on his superiors. No one called to inquire about this new and never before seen report. One week he was too busy to bother keeping up the joke, so he didn't include the FKIA report with the other weekly reports. He received a frantic phone call the very next day asking him where the FKIA report was, the Major was demanding to see it. At this point, he figured it was best just to fill out the FKIA report and send it in even though he knew it was a completely meaningless number (except for the flies of course). Those receiving it didn't have a clue what it represented, though it had become an essential and necessary report. For the duration of his assignment in that location, he faithfully filed the weekly FKIA report and was never once asked what it meant.

Rank-Based Management Undermines Communication

It's a silly story, but I haven't yet shared it with a group that didn't have their own stories to tell about FKIA reports in their organizations. How many FKIA reports do you have in your organization? It is characteristic of the nature of rank-based management to create such obstacles to genuine communication. I define rank-based management as the management practice where a select few, the leaders, are given special privilege to monopolize information, control decision-making, and command compliance. Research going back to Alex Bavalas has shown the damage done to sincere communication by such rank-based practices. To maintain command and control, rank-based leaders must frequently resort to secrecy and manipulation, to which subordinates often respond with evasive actions and subtle sabotage. This together all too often leads to inefficiencies and poor use of resources as was illustrated by the story. Today more than ever before rank-based management leads to a waste of human potential and productivity in our organizations. In our present and future economy, the key component is not material assets and machinery, but knowledge and the knowledge worker. The core process for the knowledge worker is communication, so anything that kills, hinders, or diminishes communication is bad for the economy of organizations.

In my training and consulting experience, I have realized that there are very few problems in our organizations that genuine communication could not solve. It is such an obvious and self-evident insight, and few if anyone would disagree; yet the problem of poor communication remains. Reflecting on this perplexing and nearly universal problem, I made two crucial observations:

- Genuine communication will only occur between equals.
- Secrecy breeds corruption and abuse of power.

In the absence of equality, you'll seldom have honest, open communication. You only tell those above you what you think they want to hear, and you only tell those beneath you what you think they need to know. This creates not only low levels of trust between individuals, but a growing gap between reality and the world of the top executives. Similarly, with the lack of genuine communication, organizations become obsessive about controlling access to information, so secrecy dominates corporate life.

With secrecy, positions of power seduce even good people to take undue advantage and abuse their privileges. Again, this is important to remember – even good, decent people will get caught in this dynamic. It’s not a character problem as much as a context problem. And the context, as I came to discover, is that of rank-based power and authority. What is clear is that to be successful in twenty-first century organizations, the old rank-based thinking of command and control must be rejected. However, such thinking will only be replaced when we adopt in its place what I call peer-based management.

The Solution – Peer-Based Management

Peer-based managing rests upon the basic peer principle that each individual in the organization possesses an equal privilege to speak and an equal and reciprocal obligation to listen. The peer principle in organizations requires that all persons have equal standing with respect to information, decision-making, and compliance. In so far as any person’s interest are tied up in the organization, it will not matter if they possess greater or less talent and ability, or greater or less resources invested in the organization: information must be open, decision-making transparent, and compliance voluntary and based on persuasion not coercion or manipulation. Once this basic principle is clearly articulated, it makes it very difficult for any rank-based leader to justify monopolizing information, controlling decision-making, and commanding compliance. For to do so in light of recognition of the peer principle, the leader will be heard to say, “No, you do not have the privilege to speak, nor do I have any obligation to listen to you.” I believe the very uttering of this statement makes it clear just how unjustifiable rank-based practices are.

At the same time, it does not require a concept of equality that posits equal abilities, or equal aspirations, or equal outcomes, but it does require equal standing in privilege to speak and obligation to listen. The logical implication is that the process that distributes roles, responsibilities, and resources, be one where every affected individual has the right to share in the information and participate in the decision-making procedures. In my book, *The Myth of Leadership: Creating Leaderless Organizations* (Davies-Black Publishing), I discuss two management vehicles to accomplish this equal

participation; namely, peer-based councils and the practice of rotational leadership. My experience has been that when people have the opportunity for greater control over their life by having open access to information and being active participants in making the decisions affecting their own well-being, they not only rise to the challenge, but excel. People desire greater autonomy and self-determination but acquiesce to rank-based authority out of insecurity and ignorance of other possibilities.

Four Key Peer-Based Attitudes

We all can play a significant role in creating more innovative and joyful organizations. We won't need to change who we are, but only become our own best self and respect the differences in others. It requires nothing too complicated, just that you bring yourself as you are to every conversation and allow others to do the same, guided by four key attitudes:

1. **Solicitude:** the care we have for others when we come to value the equal privilege to speak and equal and reciprocal obligation to listen that belongs to every member of our organization. We respect and treat each person as an important and vital part of our success.
2. **Speaking:** when we speak we implicitly promise to speak the truth, to speak what we believe to be right, and to speak sincerely. This requires that we offer sound reasons for our positions and beliefs, and not engage in rumors, speaking negatively about others in their absence, or in creating or maintaining a culture of secrecy.
3. **Listening:** when we listen, we do not prejudge or dismiss the other's comments because of who they are, or are not, and we appreciate that differences of opinion are the vital source of creative innovation and our own intellectual development. We seek a diversity of views and recognize the fallibility of our own perspective and beliefs.
4. **Commitment:** we commit to peer-based deliberation as the key context in which organizational decisions are made. This commitment is a commitment to four values; namely:
 - *Openness* – everyone shares equally in information.
 - *Transparency* – everyone shares equally in the decision-making process.
 - *Alignment* – everyone shares equally in management roles and responsibilities.

- *Competence* – everyone shares equally in the development of peer competencies to effectively cooperate as peers.

Practical Suggestion

In our experience of organizational relationships in the coming years, partnering and cooperating with others will be more beneficial to our success than dominating and controlling them. When hierarchy and rank as a social strategy are no longer effective, command and control managing will be replaced by true peer-based organizations. In the absence of rank-based leaders; the talent, vision, and creativity of all members of the organization will be required and so developed and rewarded.

As with all social and organizational transformations, this change to peer-based organizations will not happen over night; however, there are things we can do today to hasten the process. We can create a safe place within our organizations where the peer attitudes are recognized and examined. This could be a room or a time where everyone can speak and interact as peers safely and without fear of retribution. In these formal and informal spaces where peer thinking can be both cultivated and practiced, the following fourteen principles of peer-based managing and organizational design should be discussed and examined for possible implementation.

The Fourteen Principles

1. The peer principle – each person in our organization possesses an equal privilege to speak and an equal and reciprocal obligation to listen.
2. Openness – everyone shares equally in information.
3. Transparency – everyone shares equally in the decision-making process.
4. Alignment – everyone shares equally in management roles and responsibilities.
5. Competence – everyone shares equally in learning the competencies to function successfully as peers.
6. Design organizational space (systems and processes) in a way that nurtures the individual's sense of obligation to participate in the life and governance of the organization.
7. Value individual self-expression.

8. Encourage individuals to choose their own manner of participating in organizational decision-making.
9. Respect the need for irruptions of individuality.
10. Focus the organization around management functions and peer councils, not leadership positions.
11. Facilitate individual expression within a participatory framework.
12. Create on the human scale.
13. Charter peer-based councils.
14. Use rotational leadership when necessary.

In our organizations, we are co-creators with one another of our future. It should be a future we accomplish, not through coercion and rank-based power, but through the subtle influence of persuasion and the power of peer thinking. It can lead to a future that will not cease to both surprise and exhilarate.

Good Luck!

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