

From the Sacramento Business Journal:
<http://www.bizjournals.com/sacramento/stories/2010/08/16/smallb2.html>

Empower employees to be responsible

Premium content from Sacramento Business Journal - by Larry mandelberg

Date: Sunday, August 15, 2010, 9:00pm PDT

An emerging business model quietly appeared on the scene back in 2008 in the form of a new entity — The Self-Management Institute.

The institute was founded by Chris Rufer, founder and owner of [The Morning Star Co.](#) in Woodland. For Rufer, the self-management model arose out of his desire to “pursue my own activities and by default that allows other people to pursue their activities,” he said.

The idea of the boss letting staff pursue their activities almost sounds like letting people do whatever they want, which would lead to anarchy. People aren't allowed to do whatever they want, however, they are encouraged to define certain aspects of their job and how they are going to fulfill the related obligations. They do this in what Morning Star calls its colleague letter of understanding.

Self-management is not entirely about freedom; it's more about pushing authority and responsibility down to the lowest levels of the organization where the people doing the work can impact the work environment in real time.

When I asked Paul Green, one of the executives at Morning Star, how the company made sure the basic tasks were taken care of, he said, “A lot of the things that have to be done are very visible. When something's not happening, somebody jumps in to make sure it happens.

“There is no person formally dedicated to doing that. It happens because people are engaged and feel a sense of responsibility. People don't ever say, ‘That isn't my job, and I don't care.’ ”

Similar to the code of ethics mandated by Sarbanes-Oxley back in 2002, Morning Star has a document of colleague principles. Each employee, or colleague, is expected to commit to this list of eight obligations.

Item 5, for example, Direct Communication and Resolution of Conflicts, has six bullet points that define direct communication and conflict and how to deal with them.

Flying Buffalo

This self-management concept is certainly not new. James Belasco and Ralph Stayer wrote and published their book “Flight of the Buffalo” in 1993. The idea Belasco and Stayer put forth is that organizations become difficult to manage and lose their ability to be flexible as they grow. Most of the loss is due to the need to have control and predictability. Without a great deal of structure, or rules, the organization might be more nimble and flexible, but it also loses a certain aspect of control.

By giving an appropriate amount of authority to the employees of an organization, you give them the opportunity to make decisions and to act as a leader in their own specific area of responsibility.

One example from their book talks about a time the chief executive officer was giving a tour of his company's campus to a business associate. As they were walking around the grounds outside, they came across a gardener raking leaves with a rake that had lost all but three of its tines.

When the CEO asked the gardener why he didn't have a better rake, the man said he didn't have the authority to purchase a new one. Had the gardener been given the authority to replace his rake, he would have saved a substantial amount of time and the grounds would have looked better.

How Does This Apply To Me?

The concept of self-management and letting employees lead is an idea whose time has come. Many of today's workers have grown up with technology and they know how to use it. They don't understand the need to be in an office at specific times when they can work from home.

There are a handful of key points to remember if you want to start exploring this new model of self-management:

- If you have trained your staff to think like you and make decisions the way you would make them, you can't expect them to be free of your influence overnight. Give them time to stretch their wings.
- As long as people see you as a problem-solver, they'll bring you all their problems to solve. Recognize your role is not solving problems; it's providing the resources to solve problems.
- It requires a shift in culture to go from "I am responsible" to "I am able to respond effectively and appropriately." The ability to make decisions will not arrive overnight.
- The best person to be responsible for the job is the person doing the job.

In the not too distant future, the self-management model will be the norm, not the exception. The sooner you decide to understand it and see if it can be a benefit to your organization, the sooner you will move from surviving to thriving.