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Who Owns the Monkey?

To create a culture of accountability,
reinforce individual ownership of problems.
Always ask, "Who owns the monkey?"



Nonprofit leaders are often overworked and under-resourced. As a result, staff problems can easily move up the chain of command. You need to create a culture of accountability to ensure that the only issues that land on your plate are the ones for which you hold clear responsibility.

Let's say that one of your staff shows up in your office with a problem — a monkey — on their shoulder. As a manager, you want to acknowledge that you see the monkey and that you care about the monkey. You may even feed the monkey for a few minutes. But you can't let that employee leave the monkey behind for you to take care of. Be sure that when they walk out the door of your office, the monkey goes too.

Owning the monkey means the person responsible cannot pass the buck; they must think through the consequences of decisions and try to solve the problems that arise.

Ask yourself, "Who owns the monkey?" Create an accountable culture; don't accept a victim mindset. If you set an example of taking responsibility for your own decisions, your people will do the same.

Empowerment

The notion of owning the monkey appeared in a Harvard Business Review article back in 1974, "Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?" by William Oncken, Jr. and Donald L. Wass. They describe five degrees of initiatives that can empower staff decision-making. The employee could:

1. Wait until told (the lowest initiative).
2. Ask what to do.
3. Recommend an action and wait for a decision.
4. Act but inform at once.
5. Act, then report on the decision in due course (the highest initiative).



The manager's job is to outlaw the use of 1 and 2, and to ensure that for each problem leaving their office, there is an agreed-upon level of initiative assigned to it.

As management guru Stephen Covey points out in talking about monkeys, you should keep in mind that empowerment means you have to develop your staff's skills — a valuable investment. Managers should thoughtfully plan for an employee's development — with their input. Determine the right level of coaching and feedback for each direct report while avoiding micromanaging. You can reassure them that they have the skills and experience to make important decisions. Motivating your team members will boost their confidence and reassure them that they can take risks safely. My idea of management is serving as "First Assistant To" others, helping them to succeed.

Organizational Structure

The job of a chief executive is to create an organizational structure with functional processes. When the number of staff exceeds a few, if everybody in the nonprofit is reporting to the top executive, dysfunction is inevitable. A good leader needs to be able to communicate that in a growing organization, hierarchy is a good thing. It speeds up decision-making.

As a nonprofit shifts to a more hierarchical structure during a growth phase, leaders and managers need to determine who's responsible for each type of decision at every level; and that there is a structure that enables decentralized decision-making. You tune the structure and process to fit the work and the people and then urge your employees to make and take responsibility for their decisions. People will make mistakes, but you must make sure they own the monkey. If you step in and fix things for them, or punish them for reporting a problem, they will not make decisions.

In a culture of accountability, employees are more comfortable acknowledging reality, warts and all. Individuals do not just wait for someone else to solve the problem or hope things improve or spend their time crafting excuses or pointing fingers at others. They take responsibility for finding solutions and improvements for the problems over which they have clear authority.

At Applied Materials, people who owned their work, both its successes and failures, knew that we could adjust to an honest mistake. If people fail and do not learn though, you must move on and make changes fairly and quickly. Doing so, in fact, is respectful to your good performers who deserve to be surrounded and supported by competence and, ideally, excellence.



Conversation Starters

For Chief Executives

1. How can you serve as “First Assistant To” your staff, supporting them through successes and failures?
2. How does your organizational structure enable decentralized decision-making and empower staff to make and take responsibility for their decisions?

For Staff Team Members

1. Think of an instance where you dropped the monkey and your manager had to step in. What would you do differently next time?
2. In what ways do you see your chief executive and colleagues taking responsibility for their decisions? What can you learn from their examples?

For Board Members

1. What monkeys do you have responsibility for, separate from management’s? What leadership skills are required to effectively own those monkeys?
2. How does the board communicate its accountability to stakeholders and the public?

For Individual Donors

1. In what ways can a nonprofit best demonstrate to you its accountability and transparency?
2. What does it take for a nonprofit to earn and maintain your trust and support?

For Institutional Philanthropies

1. How do your grantees demonstrate a culture of accountability and transparency? What would you do if you lose trust in a grantee?
2. Are your grant reporting requirements creating unnecessary work and taking time away from your grantees’ focus on mission delivery? What could you do to simplify your requirements to be mutually beneficial to your institution and your grantees?