

Who Are *They*? Employee Perception of Organizational Decision-Making

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Abstract – Explaining “They”

- “They” exist in every organization...
 - “They” make the decisions
 - “They” are assumed to want to make life difficult
 - “They” set unrealistic expectations
 - “They” change the rules
- Who are “they?”
- How do employees perceive “they?”
- How do employees perceive decision-making?

Research Methodology

- Review of literature and citations
 - Yielded several supporting studies and conclusions
- Survey
 - 28 questions
 - 4 sections
 - Groups of employees at two companies
 - Higher than average education levels and tenure
 - Larger sampling would strengthen results
 - Provided valuable insight

Research Results

- Literature reveals common thread:
 - Perception of managers and organizations
 - Perception of their involvement in decision-making
 - Elements impact the formation of these perceptions
 - Participation in strategic (meaningful) decisions
 - Participation in more basic task-level decisions

Buy-In and Commitments

- Engagement/Disengagement influenced by buy-in to priorities -
 - In turn, influenced by perception of who sets priorities
 - If perceived as set by “they” without employee input – little buy-in
- Commitments – voluntary versus made on their behalf or coerced – voluntary = upheld.
 - If perceived as made for them by “they” less support and likelihood of delivery

Other Factors

- Interpersonal Trust
- Empowerment
- Employee perceptions
- Trust = positive work environment and effective decision-making
- Less likelihood of “they” perception



Empowerment

- Widely-used term...
- Describes approaches to employee autonomy in work experience.
- Generally a good thing...
- But – often does not provide employee influence at levels with true influence: strategy, priorities, objectives

Differing Perceptions

- Employees:
 - Perceive limited opportunities and effectiveness
- Employers:
 - Feel like they try to encourage, facilitate employee participation
- Place in the organization influences perception of efficacy.
- Employers seeking participation, but not in areas the employees really want to influence.

Survey Results

- Survey shortcoming - small sampling – larger would strengthen results.
- Above average education and tenure in positions.
- Researcher's experience is that responses have strong validity on their own merits.
- Larger sampling would not substantially change results.

Survey Results

- Results support perceptions of important decision-making held at higher levels.
- Supports conclusion that employees are not clear who specifically makes these decisions.
- Recognition that some decisions are beyond their power to influence.
- Reinforces “they.”
- Also confirmed sense that *some* decisions are within their ability to influence, by people they feel they know and can reach.

Additional Research

- Decisions about performance of work (versus strategy):
 - More likely to involve employee involvement
 - “They” make important strategic decisions
 - “We” often have involvement in operational decisions
 - Need for expert input on core business and operations

Defining “They”

- “They” :
 - Are others further up the Table of Organization
 - Are doubtless disconnected from reality
 - Don’t know how things really are
 - Probably make decisions just to make our life difficult
 - Easy to blame

They...

- “They”
 - Are managers, supervisors, directors maybe known, maybe not known.
 - Maybe very well-known – employees collectivizing their complaints and assigning to “they.”
 - Easier to blame “they” than to identify specific people responsible for decision.
 - Definitely easier than looking inward for responsibility.
 - Context defines “they” – they want this task done ASAP... Me? My boss? His boss?

Becoming “They”



- Become a manager = become “They”
 - “They set the sales objectives too high.”
 - They was me!
 - Managers, upper manager make the really important decisions
 - Decisions about doing the work often made by employees
 - Decisions affecting job security and other matters made by managers/upper managers
 - Empowerment efforts that don’t extent employee influence to these decisions have little if any positive impact

Becoming “They”

- All this reinforces the perception:
 - Management is not interested in employee input.
- Project management implications
 - Project teams seldom request projects or develop their business cases
 - Usually are not setting delivery requirements
 - Reinforces perception: “They” request projects, then set unrealistic expectations

Easier to Point Fingers...

- Most decisions affecting employees made at higher levels.
 - Reinforces culture of “They”
 - “They” will decide, so why take on accountability?
 - Difficult to overcome – requires initiative, experience, education, business maturity
 - Also – empowerment initiatives at the workgroup/production level are not as effective as those at higher/broader levels

Easier to Point Fingers...

- Management-driven empowerment initiatives:
 - Focus on things *management* thinks are important to involve employees in.
 - Not targeted to expand/increase employee involvement in decisions *employees* are interested in influencing.
 - Even though intent is to involve employees, in fact reinforces perception of “They.”

Easier to Point Fingers...

- Continues to reinforce “They”
 - Perceptions – if “important” decisions are made by “They” -
 - Perception is ALL decisions made by “They.”
 - Personal example – since so many decisions made by small group/top of company (“They”) –
 - Assumption was that sales/profit target for my group was, too.

Easier to Point Fingers...

- Influence of education and experience –
 - Business maturity...
 - More education/experience = more personal accountability, less “They”, less finger-pointing
 - Education/experience = interpersonal trust
 - Influence tied to interpersonal trust
 - Education/experience connected directly to perceptions of influence and degrees of interpersonal trust

Easier to Point Fingers...

- Lastly – disengagement from execution:
 - Employees think “They” make all decisions...
 - Employees disengage
 - Lose sense of urgency
 - Lack of involvement in setting objectives, strategies leads to lack of connection of these to employee work
 - Breaking this cycle helps improve involvement, accountability, motivation

Culture of “They” Effects

- At a high level – detrimental to the organization and employees:
 - Poor project execution
 - Disengagement
 - Turnover
 - Poor organizational performance

Culture of “They” Effects

- Companies whose culture fosters “They” will perform poorly by comparison.
 - Change is difficult – perceived as driven by “They”
 - Stuck in status quo despite executive-speak – can’t execute
 - “They” perception = no employee buy-in to important initiatives, change

Culture of “They” Effects

- One positive –
- “Lightning Rod” effect
 - “They” serve as focus of dissatisfaction
 - Employees forge strong bonds, trust at workgroup level
 - Albeit at expense of interpersonal trust in management

Conclusion and Implications

- Assumption – organization/management wants to change the perception of “They.”
 - Either by actually getting employees more involved or through setting expectations
- First – set expectations from the start.
 - Tell employees what types of decisions to expect to be involved in
 - Example – functional versus strategic input
 - Knowledge helps manage expectations, perceptions

Conclusion and Implications

- Personal experience:
 - Employees appreciate the understanding
 - Even if decisions are arbitrarily made above them – knowing this helps
 - Builds understanding of organizational decision-making processes
 - Sharing this builds trust with immediate management

Conclusion and Implications

- The traffic jam analogy – knowing why leads to understanding, acceptance, if not liking.
 - Less frustration, confusion
- Eliminating “They” culture is critical to project and organizational performance.
 - Nearly all effects, outcomes are negative

Conclusion and Implications

- Reducing or eliminating perception of “They” will improve:
 - Project execution and performance
 - Organizational performance
 - Turnover and morale
 - Buy-in and engagement
 - Ability to implement change

Conclusion and Implications

- “They” never meant to become “they.”
- The savvy project manager, manager, will work hard to dispel this culture.
- We must work hard to replace “They” with “We” and “Us.”
- We must be practical, yet strive to make this change wherever, whenever we can.

About your presenter...

Shawn D. Belling, M.S., PMP, is a Project Manager at Promega Corporation of Madison, Wisconsin and an adjunct instructor of project management for the University of Wisconsin - Platteville, University of California – Irvine, and Lakeland College. In addition to 16 years of project management work experience, Shawn has done project management teaching, speaking and consulting for businesses, universities and professional organizations.

Shawn presented his paper “*Losing Your Religion – Observations on the Transformation of Project Manager to Line Manager*” at PMI’s 2008 Asia-Pacific Global Conference in Sydney, Australia. Shawn also presented at the Madison/South-Central Wisconsin PMI Chapter’s Professional Development Day in April 2008 and 2009, and is invited to present at the February 2010 Asia-Pacific Global Conference in Melbourne.

Shawn is certified as a Project Management Professional and has a Master of Science in Project Management degree from University of Wisconsin – Platteville. Shawn is working on a doctorate through the University of Management and Technology in Arlington, VA and was awarded a PMI Kerzner Scholarship in 2008.

Shawn is a member of PMI at the national level, a member of Wisconsin’s South-Central (Madison) PMI chapter, and was a charter officer of NEW – PMI. When not practicing, teaching or researching project management, Shawn loves spending time with his four kids and pursuing aspirations as a mid and long-course triathlete.

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