

Authority - no need for pips on the shoulders

Part 1 of 3

For me, authority always comes from within.

Authority can be a momentary reality or a way of life but in essence, when we act with authority we experience a moment of integration, a moment without fear, and a moment when we act with no other guiding force than an inner conviction of the soundness of our judgment. Such authority integrates clarity of vision or purpose, compassionate intent, equanimity of mind and humility of spirit; becoming "an unbroken authority".

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In truth, we cannot act, or call others to act, while our authority is broken by fear, or fractured by a fog of incertitude around what others may think, say or do as a consequence. Our unbroken authority is reinforced by an inner knowing, and thus we act immediately, not delaying until a more convenient time arrives or we are more comfortable with what needs to be done.

Confusion or indecision are symptoms of an unsettled state of mind, a state we have all experienced, perhaps more often than we would care to admit at every level of our lives - as parents, as co-workers, as managers and as leaders. We are called to act authoritatively, but our minds and heart sometimes fail to integrate.

The Outside-in Authority: relying on the pips on my shoulder

Part of my schooling involved School Cadets, where the world of rank, status and authority was embedded in the environment. I gained the rank of corporal and my brother a sergeant. One of my brother's friends was the regimental sergeant major and another was a lieutenant. Through the command structure, we had varying levels of authority, responsibility and accountability - it was all neat, clear and ordered, with little room for deviation.

When I was responsible for training privates in a particular drill I knew I had authority to give commands and expect orders to be followed with good intent by my school peers. In turn, if I was in need of guidance and on-the-job training, my sergeant would call me to account (sibling relationships were put aside!).

The sergeant major was nicknamed 'major' because he was unable to 'leave his pips on the parade ground' as it were. He commanded and bullied fellow students and strutted about, on or off the parade ground. Most of the students resented him and he was often the butt of pranks. On the parade ground he was feared, resented and loathed - little respect was given or offered.

As for me, I was able to engage the good intent of those under my command and this enabled me to leverage authority while building good rapport. However, off the parade ground I was shy, unable to speak up in class, blushed with embarrassment at the drop of a hat and feared standing out from the crowd.

Both the 'major' and I were caught in the same falsehood, just with different outcomes. We both thought 'pips' (our rank) gave us authority and self-power. I don't know what happened to the 'major' but it took me many years to start to appreciate that authority comes from inside, and self-authority is a natural state inside everyone. Do I still have moments of being shy and fearful? Yes!

The Inside-out Authority: no pips needed

The lieutenant I mentioned earlier showed a different example of authority. His ability to command the troops and engage their good intent was powerful. He did not require threats, personal rebuffs or humiliation to bring the best out of his peers. He possessed a natural self-confidence and was able to bring the same confidence out in each of us. When he made mistakes he was able to take responsibility and when the shoe was on the other foot there wasn't too much hesitation on our behalf to accept our responsibility.

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I remember a situation where one of my fellow class mates (known by most to be a trouble maker) refused to follow my orders during drill practice. Suddenly the lieutenant's voice was heard. I don't remember exactly what he said, yet it was clear that he was asking the ill-will to change to good intent, and for respect to be honoured - not for me, but for the rank and the authority accorded me. He took me aside, advising that if the situation didn't change I should send the class mate on for him to handle, for the good of the group. On parting and to my surprise, he said 'You command well and have leadership qualities corporal.' We saluted and both went about our duties.

My formative years in cadets (and later in the Australian Reserves) taught me much about authority. Both the 'major' and I had lots to learn about where true authority resides. The authority demonstrated by the lieutenant taught me much about:

- ✓ First, self-authority.
- ✓ Orders and commands delivered to build respect and gain good intent create relationships of authority.
- ✓ The active support of people (and the authority invested in them) is an investment in the common good of the group.
- ✓ Make standards of performance clear and ensure that orders are followed, by all, for the good of all.
- ✓ Recognising and acknowledging leadership in others builds a chain of authority, for individuals and for the group as a whole.

Natural Authority: a contagious Inside-out process.

Exceptional managers and teams see that authority is a natural capacity within each person, regardless of their position inside the company. These companies become exceptional because they recognise and support each individual at every level toward a sense of contribution and integrated authority. These individuals, in turn, nurture other individuals toward their own innate and natural authority to contribute to the good of the entire business, and themselves. ■ ■