

How I learned to let my workers lead

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This article talks about how Ralph Stayer changed the style of working in his family business, Johnsonville Sausage. The company, though successful, faced competitive pressures from both national and regional players. At the same time, workers were not taking ownership and performing well below their potential.

On introspection, Stayer realized that the fault lay with him, not with the employees. He had fostered a management style that prevented people from taking responsibility. He also realized that it was important for him to develop a vision of where he wanted his company to go. Stayer decided to create an organization where people understood the common goal, felt empowered and took the lead, instead of coming back to him for instructions.

Stayer realized that while his business had grown smartly and was doing well, he had centralized decision making. The process of delegating decisions and making people accountable for their decisions took time.

Stayer had to first change his own mindset. As he recalled, "I did not really want them to make independent decisions. I wanted them to make the decisions I would have made. Deep down, I was still in love with my own control; I was just making people guess what I wanted, instead of telling them."

Stayer realized that he also had to bring in people from outside, who could not read his mind. He wanted people who could think independently, were strong enough to call his bluff and could seize ownership of the problems the company faced.

What lessons can we learn from Stayer's experience?

- Change is the real job of any effective leader. Change is about the present and the future, not about the past.
- Learning and responsibility are invigorating.
- People want to be great. If they are not, it is because leaders are not allowing them to be.

- How people perform largely depends on the expectations from them. Expectations are driven by goals, vision, symbols, communication, compensation systems, decision making structures, etc. The actions of managers also shape expectations.
- Learning is a process, not a goal. Each new insight paves the way for new insights.
- Leaders have to first change themselves, if they want to change the organization.