

# The importance of ‘who owns the thinking’



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About 10 years ago I attended a short training session during breakfast. I don't recall the topic or the speaker being especially effective, but one visual image presented stuck with me.

The presenter used a black-and-white photo of a rowing crew taken 50-60 years ago as an analogy for the workplace of the past. The crew leader shouts instructions via a megaphone. The course is so predictable that the leader isn't even facing forward. The crew requires a limited skillset: The ability to follow instructions and to apply muscle to an oar to propel the racing shell through a static course. (My apologies to competitive rowing members; I'm sure it's a bit more complicated than that.)

For the current workplace the presenter suggested a photo of a two-person kayak negotiating perilous white water. The situation changes constantly. The roar of the water makes all but perhaps one-word communication impossible. This crew must be able to assess an ever-changing situation, adapt and work together to apply both navigation and propulsion skills to the craft.

So how do we develop kayakers instead of rowers? Start by hiring autonomous thinkers and grow them into confident decision-makers and problem-solvers. The latter requires that we provide opportunities to solve problems. That means we need to stop solving every problem ourselves.

One of the most important decisions an organization has to make is to determine whose decision is it to make. Two bad things happen when leaders make decisions and solve problems that should be performed by the people reporting to them.

First, and most obviously, we're hindering the development of our employees. We're essentially placing a glass ceiling above them, one associated with their reporting structure rather than their demographic.

Second, by default we're not working on the things we should be. These ignored duties are less urgent but almost always strategic and thus important to the long-term health of the organization.

By overlooking these responsibilities we place a ceiling on the organization, in effect ensuring the status quo, or worse.

The transition from Super Solver to Curiosity Coach is not easy. Fellow Lean consultant Beau Keyte makes the distinction of "who owns the thinking?" When supervisors directs, analyzes, corrects or suggests, they own the thinking.

Conversely, when a supervisor asks the right questions — not to lead the employee to the supervisor's conclusion, but rather to increase the employee's awareness or understanding — the employee owns the thinking.

Here's an example of how that might look:

**Employee:** The automatic sliding door on my minivan stopped working.

**Supervisor:** Hmm. That's annoying. Those things are pretty handy when you have your arms full of groceries or kids. I wonder why.

**Employee:** Well, it doesn't matter if I use the key fob, the door handle or the dashboard switch so it's not that. I cleaned out the tracks. There were a few Cheerios down there but nothing that should have jammed it.

**Supervisor:** Those are good things to check. Are there some other easy things you might try?

**Employee:** Well, I suppose I should check the fuse. That's easy.

**Supervisor:** Yeah, good idea.

**Employee (later):** The fuse was blown. I replaced it and two days later the door stopped working again and I had another blown fuse.

**Supervisor:** It sounds like we're getting closer. I wonder why the fuse keeps blowing?

**Employee:** The only other thing on the circuit is the air conditioner compressor.

**Supervisor:** Only one other thing? That's lucky. How can we figure out for sure whether it's the door or the compressor?

**Employee:** Fortunately, fuses are dirt cheap. I can activate each independently and see which one blows the fuse. I just thought of something. Both times the door stopped working was after I ran the defroster which uses the compressor.

**Supervisor:** I'll be curious to hear how your test goes.

**Employee:** Well, the compressor consistently blew the fuse. I did a little internet research on my minivan and it's pretty common for the compressor bearings to go out at 80,000 miles. I have 85,000. I got under the hood and yanked on the pulley and could even sense some play.

**Supervisor:** So your door isn't working because your compressor bearings are bad. Who would have thought? Nice job!

The value is in asking the right questions. In addition to growing people, it's liberating to not have to be the answer machine.

## RICK SAYS

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