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With Pail and Shovel: The "Sandbox Approach" to Management and Leadership

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A familiar childhood experience provides the basis for a new management theory.

With over 25 years of management and leadership theory and practice, both in the field and in an office environment, I have come to appreciate that there is no one single theory – or practice – that has universal applicability for all practitioners of the trade. I have served for those who obviously believed in Theory X – and when all was tallied, their organizations produced when it counted. Then there were those managers who believed in and practiced Theory Y – while we had successes there and we were happy, as my memory serves me, we had more failures under the advocates of Theory Y than under those who practiced Theory X.

Throughout the period of my life between 1954 and 1980, as I became a member in the ranks of the fully employed, I gradually became aware of those approaches under which I was more comfortable and ultimately was more productive in my job assignments. I attempted to shape my own style of leadership and management around those particular approaches but without really defining them or putting them in a usable pattern.

It was not until 1980, when I was literally forced through a student assignment to describe my "leadership" style and to explain why I developed that style, that I began to shovel out some of the old theories and to give form and substance to what I later called the "Sandbox Theory."

The Sandbox. Years before I ever thought of working for a living (and those who really know me would say that that hasn't occurred yet) my parents built a sandbox for me in our yard, a common childhood experience, I am sure. As also occurred with many of us, the ground rules (other than keeping the cover on the box to keep the neighborhood cats out of it) that my mother established were simple: as long as I remained in the sandbox and played there, she wouldn't get after me. But leave the boundaries of the sandbox, and I would immediately come to her attention. This is indeed familiar to many of us, either when we were children or later when we were parents and used a sandbox to entertain our children. The limits of play are clear – the wooden sides of the box – and the freedom to play in the box is also obvious as are the consequences if you stepped outside of it.

As I reflected on this childhood memory, some patterns began to develop. The units I served with performed best, from a job performance standard as well from the perspective of unit discipline, when the guidelines were clear and the freedom to act within those boundaries was present. We didn't do as well, regardless of the management philosophy of the leader, when either the boundaries were not enunciated or the freedom to take appropriate action was denied. The advocates of Theory Y who continually intruded on our actions after giving guidance and direction usually dominated the action and precluded innovation and our taking advantage of unforeseen situations. I did not recognize it at the time, but it had been my good fortune to work for those advocates of Theory X who did give ample guidance but who also left one alone to carry out the assigned mission.

Boundaries and freedom. Easy to say but difficult to quantify and to measure, especially for members of one's work force. The ol' 1×12×4's that Dad used to build the original sandbox couldn't be used as boundaries here. Another form of parameters or boundaries for the sandbox had to be defined. Therefore, after much thought, four personal characteristics or attributes eventually emerged that could be used to outline the box for all individuals and in all situations.

The first attribute is *competency*. There is an assumption as one moves into a position of leadership or management that the personnel who are directly under one's supervision are competent to perform their assigned or inferred duties. (This assumption holds until there is proof to illustrate otherwise.) Experience has shown that it is usually the subordinate who is first aware of his or her inadequacy for the job. So the leader's initial guidance is to let all know that you, as the leader or manager, expect all personnel to be competent in their job performance and that you support all efforts to further their education and training, especially in job-related skills. How many times have we gone into assignments where we had all of the skills and experience necessary to meet the challenges? In those situations where we believe ourselves to be lacking in selected skills, we usually make the effort to become as knowledgeable as possible. In a similar manner, our personnel need to know that job competency forms one side of the box and that if they do not believe themselves to be as competent as they ought to be, then we encourage further study and learning effort.

The second side of the sandbox is *integrity*. In my career field of intelligence, where there is no way short of actual conflict or confrontation to prove the veracity of our reports and analysis, absolute integrity is a mandatory requirement. When one begins to cheat on the "little" things, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw a definite line and state that beyond that line one will not go in terms of cheating or lying or shading the truth. The consumer of our product, especially the armed forces commander, can verify the truth of all input other than intelligence to his battle plan. If he wanted to, he could physically count noses to insure all of his personnel who are reported to be present for duty are indeed there; he could go out to the firing ranges and personally check the accuracy of the live fire practices; and he could go count the crates of bullets, beans, and body bags – but he can not verify what is on the other side of the hill without actual combat. So on the matter of enemy forces, disposition, and strength, he – and the lives of our personnel – depends on the integrity of the intelligence community, singly and collectively. So the second side of this sandbox has to be integrity.

The third side is *self-discipline*. Sure, there is always the Manual for Courts Martial to enforce discipline from above, but that type of imposed discipline does not form a boundary for freedom of action, which is what we are attempting to eventually establish. The U.S. Army I came into 30 years ago was a far cry from today's Army. That Army had a rigid, imposed discipline, complete with Saturday morning inspections where everyone in the platoon has the same color soap dish and toothbrush container (my platoon had yellow, in honor of the U.S. Cavalry!). Today's Army is different – the discipline has to come from within and we train to that end. The discipline to push away from the dinner table before one gets overweight, to keep a good appearance, and to stay in good physical shape has to come from within. The same aspects apply to the civilian workforce – dependability to be on time on shift work (saying "no" to leave abuse), keeping in good health and good physical shape for one's age and environment, and demonstrating pride in one's efforts all come from within. These are all attributes of self-discipline, and all help contribute to that third side of the box.

The bottom line – or the fourth side – is *trust*. Mutual trust. The managers or the leaders trust that their personnel will do what is required and more. The individuals trust that their managers or leaders will do what is right for the accomplishment of the

assigned mission and the welfare of the assigned personnel. This attribute of trust deserves some further clarification. Included in the practice of trust is the freedom to fail. What? Freedom to do what? Fail? Yes. Without some degree of risk, there can be little forward movement. With risk, by definition, goes the possibility of making a mistake. However, if that mistake occurs as the result of an action or a decision, the intent of which was in keeping with the assigned mission and the preparation was reasonable given the circumstances, then the mistake becomes a learning experience for all concerned. Let one not be led astray, freedom to fail does not imply nor is it an excuse for incompetence, indifference, or ignorance.

An additional aspect of trust is the recognition and expectation of friction. While an analogy never proved a thing, there are certain learning points to be gained from the use of one. Keep in mind that a certain amount of friction is essential for a wheel to move forward. Without friction, the wheel will spin in place; with too much friction, the wheel will bind and there will be no motion whatever. So it is, I believe, with managerial/leadership situations – there must be a certain degree of healthy friction between and among all parties for the unit or organization to maintain any degree of forward momentum.

The final attribute of the dimension of trust is best summed up in the expression "Give a damn." Many of us spent time in basic training or perhaps in a similar intense physical, competitive environment. We were either in or saw a platoon that said it was going to set a record time on the distance run. And then we saw that platoon leader set a blistering pace with the result that the platoon leader, the guidon bearer, and maybe two or three others made it across the line in a record time. But the rest of the platoon was strung out along the road, in a piecemeal fashion, left to fend for themselves. Perhaps we also saw or were in a different platoon where the stated objective was to get the entire platoon across in a record time. There the members of the platoon pulled together and carried, if they had to, those who couldn't keep the pace or who got injured along the way. Perhaps a record time was not set, but the entire organization finished as an organization.

Ever think what the subtle message of those two platoons might be and what those messages have to do with "give a damn"? I offer that the first platoon was saying, to the effect, every man out for himself and the devil take the hindmost. The second platoon was saying "we give a damn." The message of the first platoon was that you couldn't trust anyone but yourself because no one else cares, which is a pretty poor attitude to carry into a stress-loaded environment. The second platoon was saying that if you gave all that you had, and then some, but fell short, that there would be someone there to support you because you, too, were ready to help someone else if he or she needed it. Mutual trust. And that is the message behind the slogan – be concerned about and aware of your fellow team members. None of us, individually or collectively, is in this alone.

These, then, are the four sides of my square sandbox. The sides are competency, integrity, self-discipline, and trust. And the box is also a magic square – the overall dimensions for freedom of action within the box are determined by the shortest side. An individual can be extremely competent, thoroughly dependable in terms of job performance, and can completely trust management to do what is right and yet lack integrity. The amount of individual freedom to operate that individual can expect will, in turn, be very limited because of his lack of integrity. And the same can be said for any of the other three sides of competency, self-discipline, and trust.

The box is an individual box – one per person and measured by that person to fit that person. While we may be viewed by what we do as an organization, we are still measured individually on performance appraisals, efficiency reports, and effectiveness reports. Therefore, each sandbox must have a unique, personal fit to it since the characteristics

that make up the sides are all personal attributes determined by one's own individual actions.

Once the dimensions of those sides have been determined and the overall limits of the sandbox established, then the individual must be given the freedom to operate within the given constraints or confines of the box. Personal experiences over the years have led me to the conclusion that the American citizen generally prefers to be told "what" to do and not "how" to do it, especially those of us involved with technological, intellectual, or operational fields. Personal experiences have likewise led me to the conclusion that a nit-picking boss who gives you complete freedom of action is easier to deal with and is usually more successful than a laid-back, laissez faire supervisor who continually meddles in your business. Once you, as the leader or manager, have established the sandbox and the individual has given it some personal dimensions, then back off and permit the individual the necessary freedom of action to include recognition of the freedom to fail. Always with the admonition that "when you step outside the bounds of the sandbox, you come to my attention." There is a deliberate absence of any negative term in that admonition because stepping outside of the box may indicate a need for help, a need to redefine the mission, or a reassessment of the situation. Also, there may be a need for you, the supervisor, to perhaps pay more attention to that individual on a personal basis – perhaps he or she requires more strokes on a daily basis than the average person.

This, to me, is the role of the manager or the leader – to provide guidance on the boundaries for individual actions, to assist the subordinate so as to obtain more room for maneuver and growth, and to permit the subordinate the freedom to act. The "Sandbox Theory" attempts to do that – by permitting each individual subordinate to establish his or her own operating space and by providing that required freedom of action. Application of this theory is not easy. Consistent application requires using virtually every positive attribute noted by Peters, Waterman,[1] and Austin.[2] These include management by walking around, the use of lean staffs, knowledge of one's business and the use of loose-tight controls. It takes effort, time, and training to bring about an environment where the Sandbox Approach can be used. There are risks attendant to the practice of such a theory, but the potential for far-reaching success greatly outweighs those risks.

1. Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).
2. Tom Peters and Nancy Austin, *A Passion for Excellence* (New York: Random House, 1985).

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