Silencing the Refrain, 'It's Not My Job, Man'

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By Mortimer R. Feinberg and Aaron Levenstein

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It's a familiar story: The restaurant pa tron asks a passing waiter, "Can you tell me the time?" and the answer comes back,."Sorry, sir, this ain't my table."

Or the airline passenger who asks a flight attendant "Where's seat 12A?" and is told, "I'm not on duty." The executive who recounted this episode insisted that "So long as she's wearing the airline uniform she's on duty! She's still a company representative."

Agfa-Gevaert's chief executive officer, Robert AJU Coppenrath. cites the unanswered ringing of the telephone, which he labels "a corporate offense." He tells his people: "There is no such thing as 'it's not my phone.' Every telephone in the company is our phone. Don't let phones ring."

These situations arise from the notion that "it's not my responsibility." The weak links in an organization are usually at the point where departments are supposed to meet It's at these joints that institutional arthritis attacks. When departments are separated like national frontiers, fully equipped with barbed-wire fences, bristling watchtowers and buried mine fields, seri ous losses occur.

To be sure, refusal to assume any responsibility beyond that explicitly listed in the job description or organization manual may be due to laziness or unconcern. But often the reasons are quite substantial: respect for the jurisdiction of colleagues or peers: fear of being labeled an empire-builder, turf-snatcher or imperialist; lack of familiarity with the organization structure; and failure of top management to clarify policy, particularly in such matters as centralization vs. decentralization.

People are reluctant to accept responsibility if it is not accompanied by an ex press delegation of authority. The successful executives, however, are usually those who believe that their responsibility exceeds their authority. They consider them selves responsible not only for the unit over which they preside but for the company's success as a whole.

All too often, people who lack authority withhold action because they feel they don't have the necessary information or other resources needed to act They may assume that others are better qualified to handle the problem. Management has no right to expect employees to step into situations for which the company has given them no training.

Still another factor may be concern over who will get the credit if the outcome is successful-or the blame if it is not James Robbins, president of Cox Cable Communications, places the onus on higher management to recognize when cooperative action is necessary and to assign primary responsibility. In such cases a superior must specify "who is in charge" and who is expected to "work with" him or her. Mr. Robbins argues that responsibility can be shared but authority should always remain undivided.

Theoretically, efficiency is served by departmentalization, specialization and division of labor. The goal, however, can be achieved only if management strives for coherence by constantly reminding people that they are not isolates working in their own cubbyholes but parts of a larger whole. Here is what executives, conscious of the problem, recommend:

- From the very beginning of a relationship with employees, even in the hiring interview, it is important to stress that the individual will be working for the companyâ   not just for a division, department, unit or particular supervisor.

- By presenting prospects for advancement, the company can demonstrate that looking beyond the narrow confines of the immediate assignment will open windows of personal opportunity.

- In the course of periodic employee appraisals, cooperation with others and the display of initiative in discovering and fill ing gaps should be treated as major performance criteria. Managers should seek every opportunity to reward subordinates for their contributions that benefit the whole organization.

Lyman Wood, president of Brennan College Books, in evaluating his managers, asks: How frequently do they communicate with other managers about filling organizational voids? He calls this type of person a "breaker-up of hardpan"-the layer of earth that's so tough the rain can't get through to nurture the roots. Such managers are tagged for ultimate promotion; in the meantime, they are rewarded with extra bonuses, and the president seeks out special occasions to maintain contact with them.

- The image of the customer must be kept vivid in the attention of all members of the organization. Joseph McEvoy. chief financial officer of Saks Fifth Avenue, says that the enlargement of personal responsibility is furthered by stressing that "it's the customer who pays your salary." He cites the following example from department-store experience:

Customers frequently make inquiries about their charge accounts but by understandable error may reach somebody in accounts payable. The natural tendency is to respond: "Sorry, you have the wrong department. Call this-and-this number." Instead, the preferable procedure is to ask for the customer's telephone number and then have the right person call him or her rather than compel the customer to make two calls.

- People must be kept informed about the needs of other departments if they are to be able to spot significant gaps and communicate appropriately across departmental frontiers.

Many procedures are available for this purpose. Job rotation, especially for junior executives, helps to broaden perspective. Lending personnel to other departments in periods of short-handedness, rush orders or vacation time contributes to overcoming the provincialism that blocks initiative and cooperation.

- Compensation systems can be used to get people to think beyond their own baili wick in terms of total company needs; group incentive plans and companywide profit-sharing programs provide an economic motivation for reaching out to others with supportive action and suggestions.

- Finally, management must instruct its people on how it wants them to behave when a no man's land appears on the landscape.

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