

Giving Public Employees the Power to Use Their Judgment

By Russ Linden

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There are risks, and there still must be accountability. But some leaders have shown the way.

As a public official, how can you empower the members of your staff to use their judgment and creativity and still maintain accountability? That's a classic management issue, and there's no one solution. But we can learn from leaders who have handled this well.

On Friday, Sept. 9, 2005, a few days after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, Admiral Thad Allen of the Coast Guard was appointed the principal federal official in charge. He said he was mortified by the scope of the destruction and amazed that thousands of first responders were wandering around, trying to be helpful but with no guidance.

Allen recounted how he dealt with that situation: He called an all-hands meeting. Some 2,500 people attended. He got up on a desk, explained his role and then said, "You need to listen to me — this is an order. You're to treat everybody that you come in contact with that's been impacted by this storm as if they were a member of your family — your mother, your father, your brother, your sister. ... And if you do that, two things will happen: Number one, if you make a mistake, you will probably err on the side of doing too much. And number two, if anybody has a problem with what you did, their problem's with me, not you."

Some people gasped, Allen said. Some started to weep. There was a great feeling of relief, "because nobody had told them what was important, what was valued, what their roles should be, and that their boss was behind them," he reflected.

It was a classic example of empowerment. These valiant first responders who'd been so humiliated in the press finally understood how to carry out their roles and that their leader had their backs.

Here's a second example, one that's far less dramatic and can be applied to everyday operations as well as emergencies:

When the Phoenix police department started to develop its community policing program in the 1990s, an assistant police chief found a simple way to empower the officers, to make it easy for them to go out of their way to help people, without having to run it up several management levels. He gave officers business cards. One side listed these five questions:

- Is it right for the community?
- Is it right for the department?
- Is it ethical and legal?
- Is it consistent with our values and policies?
- Is it something I'm willing to be accountable for?

And on the flip side was the following:

If the answers to these questions are "YES," don't ask permission. JUST DO IT!

Community policing is about fostering trust and relationships. It requires officers to use their judgment rather than being rigidly rule-oriented. And if you want people to use judgment and still be accountable, you need to give them some clear guidance.

That's what the card accomplishes. Suppose you're a Phoenix officer patrolling in your squad car. You see an older lady walking slowly with some bags of groceries. Looks like she could use a lift. But you're not supposed to allow someone like her to ride in the squad car. It violates the rules; you could get in trouble. With the new card, however, it's a no-brainer. Of course, you'd give her a ride. It helps her, and it shows her (and others) that you have a heart. And if your superior questions you, you can explain that you had checked off of the questions on the card.

The same five questions can help officers in high-risk situations, such as when they're in hot pursuit of a suspect. Sometimes these situations call for an aggressive response; in others, de-escalation may be the better route. These are judgment calls, and reflecting on the five questions both gives officers support and holds them accountable.

If you try this approach with your own staff, how will you respond when (inevitably) mistakes occur? Yes, there are risks here. They can be minimized if you invest time in communicating with your staff about the questions or guiding principles and discussing "what-if" scenarios. Make such discussions a regular part of your staff meetings. Over time, staff will learn how far is too far and when to ask for help.

What about you? If you were to give your staff a few questions or guiding principles to empower them without losing accountability, what would they be?



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He has published numerous articles and five books. His book *Seamless Government: A Practical Guide to Re-engineering in the Public Sector* (Jossey-Bass, 1994), is considered the primary source on that topic by many. *Working Across Boundaries* is now in its 7th printing. It was a finalist for the best book on nonprofit management in 2002 (awarded by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management). His latest book, *Leading Across Boundaries*, focuses on the leader's roles and challenges in making collaboration work.