



LYLE'S LAWS

Lyle's Law of Linking

Those readers who are of my generation will recall that the late sixties and early seventies were a time of considerable ferment on college campuses. There were some weighty issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights, the draft, and hardhats versus hippies. There were also some issues that were less cosmic in nature but were almost as intractable, such as dormitory visitation policies.

Before 1970, most campus policies governing visits to men's dorms by women and to women's dorms by men were pretty simple, boiling down to just one word: PROHIBITED. But a brave new world was emerging as students became restless and more liberated and the old principle of *in loco parentis* began to fade. Striving to accommodate this new reality, many campuses undertook a review of visitation policies. While our campus was by nature pretty conservative, our president had a good view of the cultural horizon and—somewhat reluctantly—appointed a committee to develop a new policy.

Since I am telling this story, you have probably already concluded that I was a member of that august group.

Someone called us all together, and we discussed and reviewed and rehashed and re-discussed and, after a few meetings, had gotten absolutely nowhere. Then one day I received a phone call from the president's secretary who told me the boss would like to see me. In his office, he asked me about our progress, and I reported that there was very little. He then let it be known by word and gesture that it was my responsibility to get this job done, whereupon I replied that I was not the chair of the committee, whereupon he replied, "Well, you are now." So, newly burdened with responsibility but also armed with authority, I called a meeting of the committee, explained the new order, and we hammered out a visitation policy. I also learned a valuable lesson that I state now as Lyle's Law of Linking: *Link authority to responsibility.*

You have undoubtedly heard or read that a particular manager is "good at delegating responsibility." That may be an admirable trait, but unless the manager simultaneously delegates the authority needed to get the job done, it is not really delegation. It is more properly called, "passing the buck." If someone is to be held responsible for

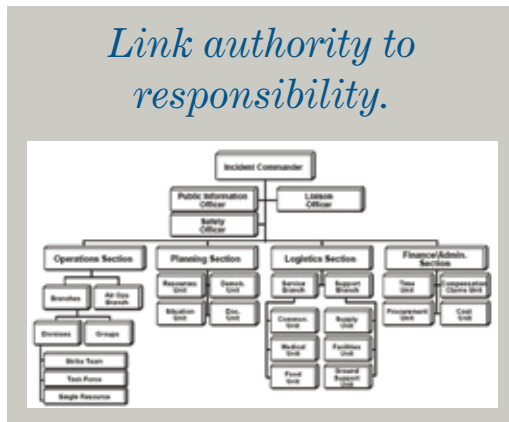
producing a particular result, it is essential to be given the authority over the processes that will determine whether the result is attained. This is another of those laws that one feels should be prefaced by the phrase, "Needless to say. . .", but then you realize it needs to be said.

Managers can start observing this law by agreeing that they will not claim to be "delegating responsibility." They will delegate authority. This is the action that requires courage and good judgment and organizational skill. The manager is saying to the other person, "I am taking my hands off these knobs and levers. You take over." Then make it clear to that other person that since they now have control, they also have the responsibility of achieving the desired result. Authority has been delegated. Responsibility has been—what?—assigned? I don't think delegated is the right word. But whatever you call it, authority and responsibility have been linked.

An understanding of the Law of Linking is important to 'managers,' as well. Whenever you are assigned a responsibility, you would do well to ask if the law is being obeyed. Ask yourself if it is clear that you have the authority needed to fulfill that responsibility. If you have doubts about it, see your boss and ask if you have analyzed the situation correctly and, if you have, what an appropriate remedy would be. Of course, you have to do this tactfully so the remedy isn't just that you go to work somewhere else. But an astute manager will appreciate the fact that you are able to determine what you need to do the job and will make sure you have the necessary authority.

The Law of Linking can even be useful in child rearing. It has been said that the most important job of a parent is to create an adult who is no longer dependent upon the parent. That means giving children increasing responsibility as they mature. But you can't expect them to take on responsibility unless they have the related authority. You can't give your teenagers the responsibility of taking the trash to the dump if you don't give them the keys to the pickup.

While good leaders are adept at delegating authority and assigning responsibility, they recognize that delegation and assignment are not synonymous with divestiture. When a ship enters inland waters, she will generally take aboard a local



pilot who then assumes authority over the navigation of the vessel and also the responsibility of seeing it safely through the various hazards to shipping. The captain, however, retains the authority to reassume control because he knows he cannot divest himself of the ultimate responsibility for the safety of the ship.

I saw this happen once when I was serving aboard the *USS Norton Sound*. We came into Port Hueneme when the Santa Ana winds were blowing about 50 knots and the pilot could not control the ship. Unexpectedly, he suddenly appeared on the fantail, obviously unhappy. The skipper had assumed control and ordered him off the bridge. There were a few tense minutes but eventually we were safely



... tied up. I'm not sure what happened to the pilot as a result of this little drama, but I am fairly certain that if we had crashed into another ship, our skipper would have lost

his command and probably the rest of his naval career. No matter what happened, he was ultimately responsible.

It takes great courage to delegate authority. I would suggest that it takes even more to un-delegate it. But sometimes it needs to be done. Even here, though, Lyle's Law of Linking provides some useful guidance. If you take back the authority, take back the responsibility as well.

I should probably tell the rest of the story about the visitation rules. The code we developed was a compromise among the various factions, resulting in a copious compendium of rules that specified visiting hours, how wide doors had to be open, how many feet had to be on the floor, etc. But time continued its inexorable march, and one year, maybe two years, later the whole thing was discarded, and we pretty much deregulated dormitory visitation. In the process, Lyle's Law was obeyed. Authority and responsibility were tightly linked. Regarding this issue, the school now had neither.

—Lyle D. Feisel, Ph.D., P.E.
Iowa Alpha '61

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