

Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Several years ago, an author by the name of Elliot Jaques wrote a book in which he discussed the role of symbols in organizations. I was recently reminded of this when a line employee volunteered some information regarding an executive in his organization. He told me that a new policy required employees to park in the outer parking areas so that customers could park close to the business. The executive he referred to had, unannounced, given up his reserved parking space and begun parking in the space farthest away.

In his writings, Jaques describes such behavior as symbolic. People garner meaning from and respond to such symbols. For many, the executive's behavior symbolized a position of equality and mutual respect. For others, it may have symbolized commitment to a value. The information shared with me by the line employee was communicated in a highly favorable manner suggesting greater respect and admiration in response to his experience.

In contrast, as a human resource manager many years ago, I was charged with developing a parking plan to accommodate all employees. One of the stipulations in the assignment was that executives would continue assigned parking in the spaces closest to the building. I'll leave it to the readers to speculate what the reaction was from employees responding to what they perceived as a symbol of power and privilege.

Consider the many symbols we experience in organizations today: Executive offices on the top floor versus the middle or lower floors, the elimination of free bottled water for all but executives in a cost-cutting move, upside-down pyramids to describe organizational structures, the reduction of front-line supervisory positions, round tables versus rectangular desks in offices, bonuses according to hierarchical level, open dialogue between core employees and executives about business decisions, multiple sign-offs for purchasing decisions, punishment for employees who take risks, meetings where core employees tell the CEO what the customer wants, locked tool cribs, gimmicks and incentive games for non-management employees, office sizes according to title, and open-book management.

Some will see in these examples symbols of trust, mistrust, power, equality, parent-child relationships, or status. You may find other meanings. I believe we interpret meaning from these and the many other symbols we experience at work and they influence how we respond. Considering the examples above, it might prove interesting for each of us to ponder the meanings behind the symbols in our work experience as well as in the symbols we provide to others, and contemplate the impact on behavior. Maybe we all have more influence, and become influenced, more than we think.

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At Ascent we believe that organizations are only as successful as the systems that engage the individuals who work there. Ascent Management Consulting is committed to creating management, culture, organization, and governance systems that enable personal fulfillment and organization effectiveness.

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