

Extract from Breaking the Mould by Peter Hunter

Chapter 7 - Ownership

Ownership is a term that finds itself on the lips of managers too often and for the wrong reasons.

The function of a manager should be to support and find ways to encourage ownership in his staff, instead of using the lack of it as a vehicle to apportion blame. Ownership is something which the workforce wants and it is usually discouraged by the things that the manager does.

On my rig in Venezuela there is a tool in the derrick called the grabber. This is a hydraulic clamp which is used to hold onto the top of the drill pipe to screw it into the previous section, this allows the hole to be drilled deeper. While drilling a deviated well, that is drilling at an angle (very few wells are drilled vertically these days) the joints of the drill pipe lie on the low side of the hole and when they are rotated the joints are eroded where they are in contact with the formation. To reduce this erosion the joints are protected by a band of very hard metal which is just proud of the softer steel of the drill pipe and therefore protects the joint.

When the grabber is used to make up a new joint the face of the clamp is dressed with very hard metal dies whose purpose is to bite into the softer steel of the drill pipe to give the grip which allows the pipe to be spun. If the grabber is not positioned correctly the hard dies come into contact with the hard band on the pipe and there is no give. The first result is that as there is no grip, the driller tries to spin the pipe but it will not spin and he has to stop. He has to relocate the jaws of the grabber onto the softer steel and try again.

The second and infinitely worse consequence of the grabber clamping on the hard banding is that the dies become stressed in a way for which they were never designed. When that happens they break and fall to the drill floor where the roughnecks are working. Each die weighs half a kilo which, landing on a roughneck after falling eighteen metres, will cause some damage.

In addition to the safety aspect, every time a die breaks the crew have to stop drilling for half an hour while it is replaced. I knew that they were suffering some downtime as a result of these dies breaking and having to be replaced but was assured that the situation was under control. After two months of the dies regularly breaking, without injuring anyone, I noticed that once again drilling had stopped and the grabber was being lowered again to change out more dies.

I was standing outside the office watching when Werner the Toolpusher saw me. He was on his way back to his office with a face like thunder and I could see that all was not well. Werner motioned me back inside the office and while I poured two cups of coffee and waited, he continued to fume.

"I am sick of telling these people what to do. I have been telling them for the last two months how to use that ***** grabber and here we are again, another hour lost and we are running out of dies. What the **** can we do?"

For a German, Werner had a very good command of the use of stars in the English language.

I knew that Werner understood what was happening on the rig but under pressure, he had forgotten what he should be doing. I asked him to go back over what he had just said and try to find out what it was he had been doing wrong. Werner had not really said much so it did not take him long to find the word in question. Almost immediately he said, "OK I get it, I have been "telling" them what to do, I know I should not be doing that but I have honestly had them up to here. Can you handle this for me?"

I said I would give it some thought. I asked Werner about his new daughter and we spent the rest of the time looking at baby pictures. Most people enjoy telling other people what to do. There is a curious satisfaction called power which makes us feel good when we tell other people what to do. When we are in a position of authority we can achieve that feeling as many times as we want because people will always say yes, then go away and appear to do what they have been told. It makes us feel good.

Unfortunately telling other people what to do is the probably the least effective way of achieving your goal. In some cases even less effective than doing it yourself, and that defeats the object of being a manager.

After we have learned how to perform a task we no longer need to be told what to do. If then we continue to be told what to do it feels insulting that your boss thinks so little of you he has to treat you as if you are an idiot. How many times have we heard the complaint, "He's always telling me what to do".

If we feel upset or insulted then it is very unlikely that we will actually do what we have been told. Instead there are a number of options available to us:

1. We do nothing then report back to the manager that we have done what we were told to do. This makes the manager happy and gets him off our back.
2. We do what we were told but we do it slowly and badly, which makes us feel better.
3. We break what we were told to do.

We feel even better about this course of action because we can shift the blame onto the manager. It was his fault for telling us to do it, and we then have the extra satisfaction of seeing how angry he becomes.

It sounds devious and nasty but unfortunately this is the way that human beings react to situations they don't like.

If you are reading this there is a good chance that you are a human being and you will recognise this behaviour in yourself at work and at home.

We all have bosses in both places.

Werner recognised that he was doing the wrong thing but he also recognised that he was too close to the problem.

I thought about it for a while and the following day asked Werner if the crew had a written

procedure for the use of the grabber. He told me there was one but the crew did not actually have a Copy. "They shouldn't need one because they all know how to use the ***** thing."

I let that go.

I asked Werner if it was OK to use the Charlas to help the crew write their own procedure for the operation of the grabber. He agreed. I began at the next Charla by asking the crew what they thought important about the operation of the grabber. What had they to do to make sure it operated correctly and what they had to avoid doing? I asked each crew in turn and gradually built up a list of dos and don'ts that took shape as their own procedure. The final step was to get each crew to vet the final document and confirm that I had not left anything out.

I showed the final document to Werner. He read it and said, "I told you they knew how to use the grabber, this covers exactly the same points as our procedure which I have been trying to get them to understand all along." I asked him if he could tell what the difference was between the two procedures. Werner rolled his eyes and said, "Yes," as if it was his five times table which he was being asked to recite for the umpteenth time.

He held out the two documents. "This is my procedure and this one belongs to the crew, they own it."

Werner knew the words but was yet to be convinced. The following month I recorded as usual all the instances of non-productive time. There were no more instances of the dies in the grabber breaking. When I left the rig two months later they were still using the same set of dies.

There had been no more breakages.

The week before I was due to leave the rig I was on my way up to the rig floor when I heard raised voices. As my head drew level with the floor I saw what was going on. The driller had positioned the grabber to spin up the pipe but before he clamped the pipe one of the roughnecks looked up and had seen that the grabber was going to bite the hard banding. He shouted at the driller to stop and look up. The driller did so and looking sheepish apologised to the roughneck for forgetting.

He changed the position of the jaws then re-clamped the pipe.

It was not the roughneck's job to check the position of the grabber but when you own something you can't be selective about what you pay attention to.

When you care, you care about everything.

Werner had listened to what I was saying and understood intellectually the lesson that telling people what to do was wrong. For Werner however, all of his working experience had been filled with either being told what to do or telling other people what to do. That represented a powerful lot of negative conditioning that Werner had to overcome before his intellectual understanding became a belief that he could use to change his behaviour towards the crews.

By the time I left the rig Werner, having seen the practical results, had found his belief and was practising hard at his new skill of managing without telling people what to do.

He acknowledged to me that it was not an easy thing. He would have to physically stop himself when he found that he was about to issue an order. He would think about what it was he wanted to achieve before asking the questions which would allow the crew themselves to suggest the best way of achieving it.

A big part of what Werner wanted to achieve was the continued development of the crews' sense of responsibility and ownership.

Werner understood now how easy it was to damage their new sense of ownership by issuing orders that robbed them of the need to think.

He was beginning to understand what he could do to allow his people to become powerful.

Werner was doing very well.

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