

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Somebody Else's Problem

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Idiosyncrasies of the human condition and how to deal with them were a specialty of the writer Douglas Adams, and he skillfully packaged his advice into quirky science fiction. I have to admit that I still resort to his ideas when I'm faced with some of the more eccentric aspects of my work.

One of Adams' rather interesting creations is the "Somebody Else's Problem" device, which his space-travelling protagonists use as an invisibility cloak for anything not meant to be seen. In the author's words: "The SEP or Somebody Else's Problem [device] is a ... cheap, easy and staggeringly useful way of safely protecting something from unwanted eyes ... it can be run for over a hundred years on a single torch battery. This is because it relies on people's natural disposition not to see anything they don't want to, weren't expecting or can't explain."*

It turns out that the SEP phenomenon permeates our earthly modern life in such a recognizable way that the concept triggered several psychological studies after it was published.

And indeed, doesn't it sound familiar? Have you ever noticed a tendency for people to ignore problems when they cannot be easily solved, hoping they'll just go away and become somebody else's affair? Once a problem is no longer accepted as personally relevant it disappears from everybody's sight. This is true, even if it's known that the result of such ignorance might cause significant harm. The resulting damage, too, can be made to disappear as "Somebody Else's Problem."

I'm going to suggest that this phenomenon, although commonplace, can be avoided in the workplace with skillful management. When obvious problems become invisible to mostly everybody around us, it's usually an expression of another widely used, but often misunderstood, concept: That of delegation by "handing over responsibility."

People can take responsibility, but we cannot make them act responsibly if they don't feel like it. Conversely, we can give authority, but people cannot effectively take authority upon themselves, unless we're willing to give up control. This may sound simple enough, but we can observe an array of curious consequences if we aren't conscious of these limitations.

If we let someone accept responsibility for a project, but we don't give them true authority to make all the necessary decisions, then it's very likely that errors, inadequacies and inaccuracies become "Somebody Else's Problem." Nobody likes to feel responsible for the consequences of other people's decisions. Similarly, if we give someone the authority to make decisions, even though there was no demonstrated interest in accepting responsibility for their consequences, then anything that goes wrong is very likely to be dismissed as "Somebody Else's Problem." Accountability is more of a personality trait than an externally assigned obligation.

I suggest that the first step to delegation should be the creation of enough space so that opportunities in your company can become visible. With patience, we'll find people who see these opportunities and feel responsible for filling them. It may take time before we can observe them take ownership of associated problems and it may take patient coaching before everybody is comfortable with a new source of decisions. But once we surrender authority, we need to do so wholeheartedly, and we need to let go of the urge to stay in control. Well-defined and disciplined management of authorities and responsibilities should at least prove to be an effective antidote for Douglas Adam's invisibility devices in our workplaces. **GT**

**Taken from Douglas Adams, "Life, the Universe, and Everything"— 3rd volume of the trilogy "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"*

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