Just the other day I watched a disturbing news clip showing a Newark, New Jersey police officer overstepping his bounds, showing exceedingly bad judgment and excessive force when dealing with a TV news reporter’s cameraman. It was a very public example of what can happen when one’s authority and ego are not kept in check.

The story was ironic. A CBS reporter was covering a march by a group of parents trying to raise people’s awareness about increasing neighborhood violence, with many of the marchers being parents whose children had been killed in street violence. But after the march, a police officer lost his cool and roughed up the reporter’s cameraman. How do we know? The camera was running and the incident was caught on film. The officer put a chokehold on the man after he was cuffed, saying “I can do whatever I want.” That is, until a city councilwoman in Newark, who was coming out of a nearby church, told the officer he was out of line.

Ego is a funny thing. It’s a vital part of our drive for success but when anyone in positions of authority start thinking they’re invincible (be they police officers, politicians, or workplace supervisors at any level), it’s time for a reality check. People in positions of authority can empower or demoralise an environment, depending on what role they give their egos.

Here’s a philosophy I like and advise leaders to consider. Build your social leadership skills instead of relying on your positional authority. After all, how much respect do we give people who rely on the phrase “because I said so” to motivate us? People parading their positional authority with an air of superiority rarely command the admiration they think they’re getting.

If you’re in a position of authority, it’s probably wise to get some feedback about your management/leadership style. Just be sure to get it from people who aren’t going to blow smoke for you. Find people who will be straightforward and frank about your style.

If you report to someone, ask his or her opinion about how you’re coming across. It’s not a sign of weakness, it’s healthy and mature to confront any issues that might be (or become) stumbling blocks. In addition to getting feedback, managers and leaders should also pay attention to other factors that may indicate an out-of-check ego: high turnover, poor communication flow and poor morale, among others.

Keeping egos in check can be especially difficult for people at the top of an organisation. In his book Inside the White House, Ronald Kessler interviewed many people from the permanent White House staff, giving us an insider’s view of many 20th Century presidents. One common thread was that presidents often lose touch with reality because they get so separated from it. The power of the office is seductive. It not only influences the President, it influences people around the President to morph into yes-men. According to Kessler, even hard-nosed US senators have become like putty in the presence of a president. The result? Nobody challenges the President, and his decisions lose the benefit of multiple viewpoints.

With that as an example, those at the top of any organisation must be careful to stay in touch and not squelch or brush off dissent. If people disagree with a leadership decision, it might be for good reason. Listening to and seriously considering all sides of an issue is good decision-making practice. This shouldn’t change for people at the top.

This is not to say that human ego is bad. Again, egos are vital for success. Without egos, people wouldn’t seek positions of leadership and teams wouldn’t strive to be their best. But when a person becomes convinced of his or her own superiority, then his or her ego becomes a dangerous detriment to an organisation’s effectiveness and efficiency.

At careermag.com, in an article written by Tim Connor entitled In Management, Your Ego is a Performance-Killer, we’re told that “ego has cost corporate America more money than any other single factor.” I would agree. Connor also points out that “your ego is not part of your DNA or genes. It is man-made and can be un-made or controlled if you choose”.

For anyone with authority, keeping one’s ego in check is as equally vital for success as having the ego itself. Here are some facts: Yes, you can be wrong, and yes, your subordinates can be smarter than you. Also, yes, you can reverse bad decisions, and no, you don’t have to know everything. It’s also healthy to exercise patience, share the limelight and invest your time in others. The bottom line is that positions of authority can be dangerous if one’s ego steps up to center stage. It’s better to keep the organisation’s goals at center stage and focus your efforts on helping others as they work toward achieving those goals.
Resource sharing is a much needed life-line for many councils, offering benefits such as improved economic viability and increased access to specialised services and skills. In the November 2009 LGAT newsletter, LGAT President, Mayor Barry Easther, commented that, “For many councils, resource sharing was the only way to make them viable into the future as sustainable units.”

But while resource sharing is a useful approach to the provision of Local Government services and, in many cases, is the only way to stave off a forced amalgamation, it is not without its dangers. One of the potential minefields when councils start resource sharing is local community representation - when assets and positions, including positions such as the General Manager role (as we’ve seen Circular Head and Waratah Wynyard Councils do), are shared, to ensure that each individual council community understands what it is getting out of the process, particularly whether it is receiving the same level and equality of representation.

Much of the success of resource sharing relies on open communication, both within councils and with your respective communities, at all stages of the planning process. While resource sharing usually means a better standard of service for the councils involved, it is likely that some people in the community will have concerns. These concerns could include thinking that resource sharing means that their council is losing its autonomy, that they won’t have the same access to services, representation, input into decision-making, or that it is the beginning of an unwanted amalgamation of councils.

Councils need to communicate with their communities to allay these fears and bring them along as part of the journey. This communication cannot be ad hoc, after the decision has been made, or when the first signs of public unhappiness and resentment begin.

As part of the process towards reaching a resource sharing agreement, there needs to be a systematic communications plan to ensure that all stakeholders, particularly the ratepayers, are fully aware of the costs and benefits of resource sharing and why it is being considered, as well as some reassurance the councils involved understand the communities’ needs and wishes. In actuality, it is the application of sound project management practice: strategic communications as a component of stakeholder and issues management, engendering trust and credibility. Resource sharing between local governments is the future and, if properly managed, will be an experience that builds communities.
Effective Team Management

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The ability to lead teams is a critical skill for managers, supervisors and project leaders. Both within or across departments, teamwork needs to be effectively managed and talents engaged.

The key to sharpening our team management skills lies in the following questions:

• How does a team leader win the confidence of the group?
• What’s the best method for setting team goals?
• How can individual performers become team players?
• How do teams learn?

Confidence is earned when team members perceive they are supported both emotionally and practically. Team leaders can do this through four types of effective behaviour:

1. Monitoring the work by giving timely feedback and reacting to problems with understanding and help;
2. Providing socioemotional support by defusing conflict and keeping everyone in the loop about stressful situations; addressing negative feelings; socialising and disclosing personal information;
3. Recognising good work both privately and publicly; and
4. Soliciting and acting on team members’ ideas, opinions and wishes.

Confidence is lost if the team leader engages in the following ineffective behaviours:

1. Monitoring the work by checking on the status of tasks too often or too long; displaying an inadequate understanding of subordinates’ capabilities or work; providing non-constructive negative feedback and displaying lack of interest in subordinates’ work or ideas;
2. Failing to clarify roles and assign tasks appropriate to team members’ talents; changing assignments or objectives without clear rationale; giving assignments that conflict with other management instructions; and
3. Avoiding solving the problem.

The best method for setting team goals takes into account the hidden costs when goals are misguided. ‘Learning or mastery’ goals lead to better outcomes than ‘performance’ goals. A goal is never justified by unethical behaviour and/or excessive risk-taking and the leader cannot underestimate or ignore undesired results of goal-setting. Goals are appropriate when you know exactly what behaviours you want and when you aren’t concerned about secondary behaviours. Unethical behaviours would need to be addressed prior to setting learning or mastery goals.

Creating a stronger outcome than goals is ‘intrinsic motivation’, where the work is rewarding in itself. Teams are intrinsically motivated in environments where people want to achieve, where they want to help the team or council, and where strong ethics are valued. Since goals can undermine this intrinsic value of work, sometimes the best solution is no specific goal at all, or only mastery and learning goals.

A great team leader recognises which qualities of individual performance can be at odds with being a team player and manages his or her teams accordingly. A potentially great team with strong individual contributors can quickly be undone by issues around trust, conflict, team accountability and intergroup rivalries. Competition between groups can provide motivation, but if competition becomes too strong, it can inhibit cooperation and lead to dysfunction. The best teams combine complementary skills but, more importantly, are energised by striving for the same goal. Solutions can include changing team members but the process of working through frustration and conflict can be very rewarding.

Teams learn through goal achievement, task mastery and group process. Learning in teams is a key mechanism through which organisations become strategically and operationally adaptive and responsive. Teams flourish by encouraging diverse individuals to work together. ‘Outsiders’ can introduce valuable ideas and skills, and everyone learns that the team can accomplish what a single individual cannot. Learning and execution are often at odds: learning involves uncertainty, false starts and occasional dead ends. Team learning in organisations must be recognised as a strategy for tolerating forays into the unknown. Implementation can follow.

For information about in-house workshops and council development programs, contact LG Performance, Tasmania on 6236 9055, or email Annette@highpertraining.com.au.
With business confidence in the economy starting to improve, it is important that organisations keep a firm grip on the attraction and retention of quality executives.

After a period of time where many executives avoided the uncertainty of joining a new organisation, activity in the employment market for senior executives is now increasing. It seems these individuals are ready to put the ‘tough year’ behind them, explore their options and search for challenging and exciting new career steps. Fortunately for Tasmanian employers, our state is increasingly viewed as an attractive destination for both career opportunities and lifestyle.

The prospective talent pool available to organisations presents an excellent opportunity to consider the organisation’s structure and identify skill gaps within executive teams. Now is the time to revisit strategic direction, evaluate changing markets and establish the right people, structures and systems needed to reflect the organisation’s vision and support ongoing profitability and growth.

When it comes to the most valuable executives, retention is as important as recruitment. High engagement with key executives (partially achieved, for example, by enabling them to make significant contributions to strategic business decisions) reduces the risk that they will be actively seeking opportunities elsewhere. Getting the right capabilities within the team to support the executives is also important, including line managers who can attend to the operational aspects of the business and free up leaders to focus on the bigger picture.

The ultimate objective of an executive recruitment process must be to attract and retain the best-qualified candidate for the role - the candidate who will be able to add value to an organisation in the shortest possible time and remain engaged with that organisation as their career develops.

KPMG provides a range of financial, advisory and human resource services to local businesses in Tasmania. Phone (03) 6230 4000.