

Governing Energy

Stop Work?

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In the 1960s Yale University Professor Stanley Milgram conducted a number of controversial **Obedience Experiments** whereby “teachers” would deliver an electric shock to “students” when that individual (hidden in another room) gave an incorrect answer. The shocks would increase up to 450 volts when prompted by the Facilitator.ⁱ In reality, no shocks were given and the student was part of the experiment.

Firmly but politely (some say yelled) the Facilitator would tell the *teachers* to continue despite concerns they raised. Sixty-five percent of the 40 participants in the study delivered the maximum shock level! Moreover, when asked about it later, 84% were glad to have participated in the study.ⁱⁱ

While the study had many flaws, About.com summarized a few findings that might be relevant for us today:

- The physical presence of an Authority Figure dramatically increased compliance with the instructions
- Since the institution (Yale) was held in high regard, participants believed the experiment was safe
- Teachers assumed that the Facilitator was a competent expert
- The Facilitator stated that while the shocks were painful, they were not dangerous
- Later experiments suggested that in the presence of rebellious peers, obedience levels dropped dramatically
- In 2009, a repeat yet still controversial but more controlled with less voltage experiment produced the same rate of obedience as the original

One outcome from these studies suggests, “that situational variables may have a stronger sway than personality factors in determining obedience.” Other cases suggest that the presence of a strong Authority Figure will inhibit good communication and may contribute to incidents such as the crash of the Korean Airlines 747 in 1997.ⁱⁱⁱ

Regardless of the Milgram’s experiment poor methodology and ethical issues, there does appear to be anecdotal evidence that people tend to obey those perceived as organizational Authority Figures with expertise.^{iv} Much of Organizational Science is based on this premise.^v

In the current economic climate, organizations are stressed. The need to be *agile* and *resilient* are pressing concerns.

These pressures put considerable strain on individuals in the organization, some of which may be fearful of losing their jobs. If the first-line Authority Figure directing elements of field operation interprets managerial directives as deemed to allow poor decision making processes and behaves accordingly, Operational Excellence can be jeopardized.

Employers are urged to give employees and contractors Stop Work Authority and assimilate this mindset into its organizational culture.^{vi} Empowering individuals to stop revenue producing processes in the event they and they alone see something that warrants that action. The intent is to stop accidents and save lives and prevent injuries.

Organizations in stress can develop conflicts among groups and individuals.^{vii} It is even more critical in this type environment for supervisors to be clear regarding safety directives such as Stop Work Authority.

For example, through body language or even direct statements a Field Facilitator Authority Figure “suggests” that it is critical that production be maintained, an individual afraid of losing his or her job may NOT take *gray area* Stop Work actions out of fear of the consequences. What if he or she is wrong, or the situational aspect of the decision is questionable and a more seasoned individual might have made a different decision?

It is more important during economic downturns that organizations remain true to their core principals. Individuals will obey the Authority Figure present (whether onsite or virtually). These leaders must send the right message if Operational Excellence directives are to be adhered to.

Are Your Field Facilitators Actions Aligned with Organizational Objectives?

About the Author

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End Notes

ⁱ <http://psychology.about.com/od/historyofpsychology/a/milgram.htm>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/korean-culture-may-offer-clues-asiana-crash-6c10578732>

^{iv} <http://www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2014/07/obedience-authority-and-domination.html>

^v Shemwell, Scott M. (1993). Management Theory - Evolution Not Revolution, *Proceedings of the 11th Annual Conference of the Association of Management*, 11 (2), pp. 74 - 78.

^{vi} <http://www.bsee.gov/uploadedFiles/BSEE/Final%20Safety%20Culture%20Statement.pdf>

vii Shemwell, Scott M. (1994). Organizational Conflict and Dispute Resolution, Proceedings of the 12th Annual Conference of the Association of Management, 12 (1), pp. 154 - 158.