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We begin with two scenarios:

1) Without a formal role, an extra officer joins a headquarters company and dives right in. His rank ensures he's listened to, but his directions run counter to the rhythm of the shop. Soon the shop is in disarray.

2) Tasked with her first assignment, a new lance corporal struggles. She has plenty of initiative but has difficulty rallying people around her to help. By necessity, she often says, "Gunny needs you to do this." Calls back to Gunny are frequent and create a perception that she is ineffectual.

The experiences of these two Marines appear worlds apart. But they both share the one trait that determines success or failure for all leaders: Their authorities and their responsibilities are unbalanced.

The theory is simple, the authority to make decisions and the responsibility for success must balance. Authority without responsibility results in confusion, wasted efforts, and at worst abused power. Responsibility without legal or moral authority destroys any hope of progress. But as often happens with solid theory, the devil is in the details.

The devil in this case is human nature. Some leaders withhold authority because they don't fully trust their subordinates. These leaders rob their organizations of initiative and speed through endless approval processes. And in the end, many subordinates like it this way, preferring to have a way out instead of shouldering the burden of responsibility. Finally, a leader cannot fully delegate responsibility away, he or she is always responsible in the end.

These natural impulses typically result in a yanking back either authority or responsibility in the real world. Ask experienced members of any unit about it and the stories of derailed projects and dramatic displays of loss-of-confidence stack up. The end result is always the same, having lost either their authority or responsibilities, the subordinate leader loses their effectiveness.

Practically speaking, how does a commander maintain a subordinate's balance and ensure performance?

A recent episode of the [a16z Podcast with Dick Costolo and Peter Levine](#) offers the best insight I've found:

"It's not your job as a leader to prevent mistakes from happening, it's your job as a leader to correct mistakes as quickly as you can when they happen. If you try to lead by preventing mistakes from happening, nobody is going to take any chances and the company will slow down to a crawl because everyone is going to go, 'well I don't want to get into trouble, something might go wrong if we do that,' and then everyone is going to go around asking for permission and then nothing gets done."

Focusing our efforts on correcting mistakes instead of preventing them provides several benefits. First, we communicate essential trust in our subordinates. Second, by insisting that our subordinates keep us informed without seeking approval, we outline what has been delegated to them and what has not. Third, and most important, we build the institutional capability to function without our presence. I think military leaders intuitively grasp this point, but if we are honest we'd acknowledge failures big and small all around us.

Ironically, when we should be most tolerant of mistakes (like in training) they are the least allowed. Training can be high visibility and many commanders are unwilling to risk

mistakes. So, they reach down and yank away authority or shuffle around responsibilities. They commonly defend their actions by pointing out that they can see a sub-optimal decision being made. But these commanders must learn to tolerate temporary sub-optimal decisions in order to achieve a greater level of optimization.

One final point... there is an obvious exception to this tolerance when potentially fatal mistakes are being made. Outside of some combat situations, we must assume that no leader would intentionally make a fatal decision. Intervening in this case is not removing their authority, it is providing them with the information they need to self-correct. The additional information should be discretely provided in order to not rob the subordinate of their authority.

It's clear that the balance between authority and responsibility is crucially important and delicate to maintain. But with deliberate attention, we can achieve balance with our subordinates and empower them on our behalf.

When was the last time your responsibilities and authorities became unbalanced? And how do you keep them balanced now?

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