

Rights & Responsibilities, Participation & Influence

This idea of rights and responsibilities is broad and has applicability in many areas our lives. From civic duties, to belonging in our communities to our jobs. The short story is anytime we feel we have a *right* to something, we need to pause and consider if we are fulfilling the *responsibilities* that come with that right. We have a duty to balance our rights with our responsibilities.

When practiced day-to-day, this model and language can keep us always considering the dynamic spectrum of rights, responsibilities, participation, influence and respecting expertise.

Perceived rights without responsibilities becomes the negative connotation of *entitlement*. Perceived responsibilities without the correlated rights feels like an unappreciative employer. An employer who is also *entitled* to more than what they agreed to when they made the employment deal.

In employee owned (EO) companies this concept is far more powerful. Whether it is a cooperative or ESOP, there are certain real and perceived rights that come with becoming a shareholder while also continuing to be an employee.

Dr. Chris Mackin developed a model and measurement tool assessing the health of an employee owned company. It is through his thought leadership and mentoring that this practice progressed. The National Center for Employee Ownership has continued this work.

Imagine each - rights/responsibilities and participation/influence - on a spectrum with a dial. Each company will uniquely dial these based on their business: their need to control aspects of their brand image, growth plan, and company philosophies. None are wrong, each is unique and will change as circumstances do. Making these matters clear and changes deliberate and conscious will help avoid confusion around decision making and the employee owner role in the company. It will help keep company culture unified and keep unhealthy subcultures from developing. This is a model that will help develop critical thinking and ultimately self-evaluation on decision making inside the company.

A Practitioner's Perspective

The job, Control

In all companies, there are jobs that must be done to a specific level of quality. The Rights and responsibilities model can be applied at the individual job level especially as it pertains to control. We know there is a lot to be said for feeling like you have some control of your life. When we do not have agency, authority and autonomy we feel out of control, ungrounded and disconnected. Knowing what we control can help build responsibility, commitment, and most importantly ownership for a job well done or accountability for what does not go as planned.

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We also know that it is great when you are unified to a purpose. To do this we grow job autonomy (freedom from unhealthy micromanagement) within a model of unified values, plan(s), mission and purpose.

For example, I feel like I deserve autonomy. I have few transferrable skills and am new in the job. Because of this inexperience my manager may micromanage me (likely a good thing for someone just learning her way) to make sure I get what I need to gain the necessary experience. As I show that I can do great work, I strive to gain the right to my autonomy (with some direction from my manager so I stay on target with the company plan). I have demonstrated my capabilities and competence and have earned the right to autonomy while still integrating to the interdependent purpose. My manager has the right to monitor and direct my work, but he also has the responsibility to grow my commitment, skill and treat me with respect.

The team member, Participation.

In most EO companies managers know how to leverage the wisdom of their teams and employee owners in developing plans. These managers are often fantastic group facilitators. My favorite philosophy is servant leadership as a concept (we all serve the business best by helping each other be and do our best). Servant leadership is a mindset and situational (flexible and contextual) leadership is a practice. Manager's in EO companies will often lead people in participation opportunities at the team level. If there is a change or opportunity for improvement there will be projects, committees, or discussion to solve it while also moving the performance of the team forward while staying in unity with the plan, values and mission of the company.

For example, my manager is building her annual budget. She knows the priorities for the company and she wants to make sure she has our team insights. We talk about this and participate in the discussion to create a powerful team plan. We may also be given specific budget line items to develop and manage.

My right is to participate and help add value to the discussion, the company and my fellow employee owners. My responsibility is to use a responsible voice when I do participate. To be a productive contributor. My right is to influence, but my responsibility is to respect the expertise of others who may know more and have a special experience or education that warrant their role in final decision making. I have also fulfilled my responsibility to be informed and respect constraints while taking the right to be a contributing creator within the constraints.

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The shareholder/stakeholder, Influence.

EO or purpose based companies are often oriented around the idea of the stakeholder model. In business, there are many stakeholders - consumers, employees and communities (the environment, neighborhoods, local economies, etc.). EO company leaders intentionally use the wisdom of the many to help create prudent business plans. The leaders and founders have often created the vision for a distinctive company and they look to the many stakeholders to forge the path and accomplish activities designed to achieve the vision. The insights of the employee owners help provide transparency through the company and into the day to day mindset of the consumer. This is the great authenticity that employee owned and purpose based companies provide to their consumer. The employees and management are all in the business together, with similar motives to give consumers great products and by exemplifying the values, mission, vision and purpose through displays of their individual and collective character.

Leaders catalyze and leverage this differently often varying on the size of the organization. Collective annual planning sessions, employee elected/nominated committees, formal governance structures, contests for best solutions, innovation fairs and events, SWOT input, regular listening sessions, and simple interactive walk-about. These are typically planned but serendipitous conversations are important to keep proximity between leaders and employees. In this influence perspective, proximity to all people and overlooking the typical organizational levels is important. Dilution can lead to bias, generalization or important missing perspectives through the telephone game of organizational levels.

For example, my VP is calling a discussion on new ideas for strategy. She wants to hear what we think. The company has designed this as a right for me. I love it because I get to be a part of the business that is bigger than my job. I still have the responsibility to use a responsible voice, but also to use an active voice. To have an active voice I will have read materials, the financial briefing and other resources that have been provided to prime me for the discussion. An informed voice is a more powerful voice. There may be expert statements and viewpoints that help me become a more capable contributor. I also have the responsibility to keep in mind that there will be many different opinions, viewpoints and insights and when the decision is made, if it is different from my opinion, I will respect the others who also had influence. We each only have so much time to focus on priorities. My influence skill will enable me to be conversant, but I will not need to, or be expected to, have the same skill as say our CFO, COO or CEO.

The bottom line – there are limits and there are liberties to control, participation and influence and companies can help make these clearer by making it part of a regular discussion.

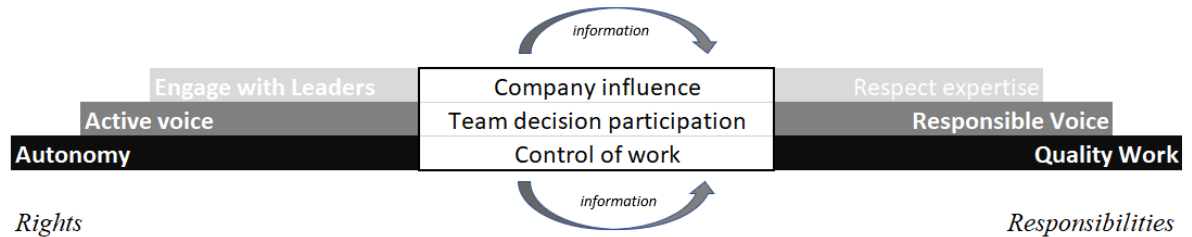
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Rights and Responsibilities

It would become burdensome to list every right and responsibility, but people can use this model to examine the dynamic.

For example, a company may have invested significant research and



development into consumer research and have a very specific brand image. They may have hired consultants, purchased data and have picked-the-brains of their sales force. This leads to a decision to change a certain aspect of the business, but some employee owners aren't on board.

- ✓ *Insights were procured from a well-rounded circle of experts*
- ✓ *The sales force, the internal constituency closest to the consumer, was encouraged to provide perspective*
- ✓ *The leadership team has developed a business vision for the brand*

Are the employee owners who aren't on board ...

- ? *Using a responsible voice to communicate their concerns and/or ideas*
- ? *Have they respected the many, varied inputs from subject matter experts*
- ? *Have they used opportunities given to understand how the business runs, the premise and need of unity and alignment behind the vision, the mission/vision/plan and the various forces at play*

Each situation provides an opportunity to calibrate your company's spectrum of control, influence, participation, rights and responsibilities and using this model as a frame for discussion can help people understand how this applied concept works. It also gives people a language to question and understand the decision making process. It can also help leaders and managers examine their need to control or let go of different decisions. We know that leaders can be excellent at growing the competency of their people and as this grows, leaders can lead more and manage less. The feeling of success is incredible when we know we contributed to something that matters.

P.S. Never forget your unique company style! You can develop good structure, norms and mental models and not become stuffy. You can be irreverent and critical thinkers at the same time.

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