

Why the Chairs don't get Fixed



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Have you ever wondered why, in a business, there are often things that need to get done but they never seem to? Even more interesting, have you noticed that in some situations people simply refuse to offer any sort of help to people in other departments?

Recently, Jonathan told me a story that throws some light on how this sort of dynamic might evolve.

Finding a Broken Chair

It was a Monday afternoon, and Jonathan was in a meeting with three colleagues. He happened to sit on one of the meeting room chairs, and the back felt quite loose. Upon investigation, he discovered that there were two screws missing from where the back of the chair attached to the upright. The other screws were somewhat loose.

Being a good citizen, Jonathan got a sheet of paper and wrote a warning note which he placed on the chair. He then called the administration department responsible for managing all of the different office facilities. He then went back to his meeting.

A couple of days later he got a call from the facilities department saying that they had received news that he had broken a chair in

the meeting room. He was a little taken aback, but took the time to explain to the person on the phone that he hadn't actually broken a chair. All he was doing was letting them know that there was a problem with a chair, and that it needed fixing.

For some reason, maybe caused by the language gap, he was unable to fully explain what the problem with the chair was. The facilities manager asked if Jonathan could meet him and take him to the meeting room with the broken chair, and explain exactly what the problem was. Being a nice, helpful human being, Jonathan did not decide to call it a day. Rather, he helpfully agreed to physically show his counterpart what the problem was. The two met in the meeting room and Jonathan singled out the damaged chair, and then showed the facilities manager what the problem was. He then departed, leaving the facilities manager scratching his head.

The Saga Continues

Several hours later Jonathan was very surprised to get another call from the facilities manager, who was asking where he might find screws that could be used to fix the chair. Jonathan thought that this was a bit much, and that the facilities manager should have some way of solving that problem. But, he let his helpful

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nature get the better of him. Still wanting to be helpful he suggested that the screws looked fairly standard to him and that they should be located at the local hardware store.

The facilities manager hummed and hawed, as if he really wasn't sure what to do, or where to go, so Jonathan said that he often went past the street where all the hardware stores were located and that he would pick up some screws.

He then promptly forgot.

Now it's YOUR Fault

Ten days later, Jonathan got a call from the facilities manager asking about the screws. The tone of the call was somewhat strange, bordering on the unpleasant. The facilities manager didn't quite go so far as to blame Jonathan for holding up the whole process, but he was careful to indicate that nothing had happened yet because he was waiting on Jonathan to deliver the screws.

It just so happened that Jonathan was planning lunch that day on the same street that the hardware stores were located on. He promised to pick up the screws that afternoon.

When he returned from lunch this time, Jonathan had a little packet of screws with him. He called the facilities manager and said that the screws had arrived. He was taken aback when the facilities manager suggested that Jonathan should take the screws upstairs to the facilities management department.

Wising up by this stage, Jonathan refused,

instead requesting that the facilities manager arrange for a messenger to pick up the screws. After a little bit of discussion, this was agreed.

A couple of hours later, a messenger arrived and Jonathan duly handed over the screws which disappeared out of the door. With a sigh of relief that the saga was finally over, Jonathan went back to focusing on his real job – making money for the firm. But...

The Last Straw

Later that day, just when he was beginning to give some serious focus to an important business problem, the phone rang. It was the facilities manager. He carefully explained to Jonathan that he really didn't know how to fix the chair. As it seemed Jonathan was very much a handy man type of guy, would Jonathan be so kind as to help with the actual fixing of the chair?

For an eternity Jonathan really did not know what to say. He was trying to work out in his own mind what had happened. It all began when he saw a damaged chair, and alerted the department concerned. After being initially blamed for breaking the chair, and negotiated into finding the screws to fix the chair, somehow he was now being asked to fix the chair himself. Luckily, at that moment, he had the presence of mind to hang up the phone. Without a word. And then, instead of working, he spent the rest of the afternoon reflecting how he had somehow become a victim in the whole process.

He also began to get a glimmer of understanding. For some time he had



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wondered at why people in the company didn't seem to be that willing to help each other out, especially people coming from different departments. He had also wondered why things that were damaged and broken somehow didn't ever seem to get fixed. This had been especially vexing for him, because many of the problems that remain unfixed for long periods of time seemed to him the easiest things in the world to fix.

What he didn't know was that he was living in a company where a set of invisible, unspoken rules were in operation.

They simply went like this:

- If you blow the whistle about any problem, you caused it
- Since you caused the problem in the first place, you have to help solve it
- If you accept the premise of the first two rules, and agree to help, if you are slow then you are to blame for slowing everything up
- Since you were the wise guy to point out the problem in the first place, it has to be your responsibility to fix it.

Now he knew why nothing ever got fixed, and why nobody ever wanted to help anybody else in the company. ●