

POWER BY PERMISSION

For command to happen there has to be an acceptance of command. For authority to be exercised by those in authority, there has to be a willing submission by others to the authority which is exercised over them.

This is certainly true of the prevailing government of the day, at least in a mature democracy. As the saying goes “the Queen rules by the grace of God (Dei gratia regina) but Presidents only lead by the grace of the people”. It is equally true of other authority figures be they religious leaders, police and army officers, doctors, parents, teachers, managers and even sports coaches. For any one of them to perform their role, to actually do their job, requires in the first instance the consent of those in their charge to them doing so.

Effective policing for example is only possible once the general population has given its consent to being policed. When this is the case police come to the scene because civilians have called them there. The use of force by the police, if they perceive that the situation requires it, is accepted. People will not obstruct the police when performing their policing tasks nor will they resort to other means of protection. Members of the community will work with the police to ensure that criminal elements within the community are apprehended.

The level of policing currently admissible on the streets in South Africa’s urban townships is graphically illustrated in an incident described by Johnny Steinburg in his book “Thin Blue” (2008). Two police officers come upon a group of 100 odd people drinking on the streets on a Friday night. To enforce the law against drinking in public, suggests that they arrest those holding bottles of beer. The officers go up to two individuals in the crowd, extract the bottles out of their hands and pour the beer out onto the street. The rest of the crowd watch on. They do not retaliate but most continue to openly drink their own beers.

The two officers know that the crowd would not acquiesce to having any one of them taken away in the back of a police van. The crowd are prepared to lose two bottles of beer to the street, but not two people to the police station cells.

Of the two parties in the relationship it is the township residents, not the police, who ultimately decide to what extent they are policed. At this point in time in this township a two officer patrol is allowed the pretence of policing, nothing more. Not so long ago, policemen driving freely around the township on a Friday night would not have been tolerated.

Those in command roles in the workplace similarly can only lead, if and when, they have mobilised the consent of the majority of employees to their doing so. In reality it is the people who determine to what degree they are prepared to be led. Ultimately the extent of their commitment to the goals and objectives of the enterprise sits in their hands, not in management’s.

Management knows where they are positioned, at any point in time, on a scale from “total rejection” to “total acceptance” of their authority by the general climate which prevails among their employees. When those in authority are accepted, their visibility outside the Boardroom is welcomed. Employees take their concerns to them rather than to their employee representative or the Human Resources function. They abide by managerial decisions and if disciplinary action is taken do not rail against it. The average employee willingly does what is expected and more.

The degree to which the authority which is exercised is not accepted, on the other hand, is reflected in how much resistance there is among employees to that authority. The “resistance” may be covert (evidenced in snide remarks, sarcasm, gossiping, a dragging of heels) or overt (manifested in a breakdown in communications, a go slow, a strike or parting of the ways). If resistance exists in whatever form, other than among a disaffected minority, there is leadership work to be done.

The key challenge facing anyone in authority, therefore, is that of establishing and then maintaining the legitimacy of that authority.