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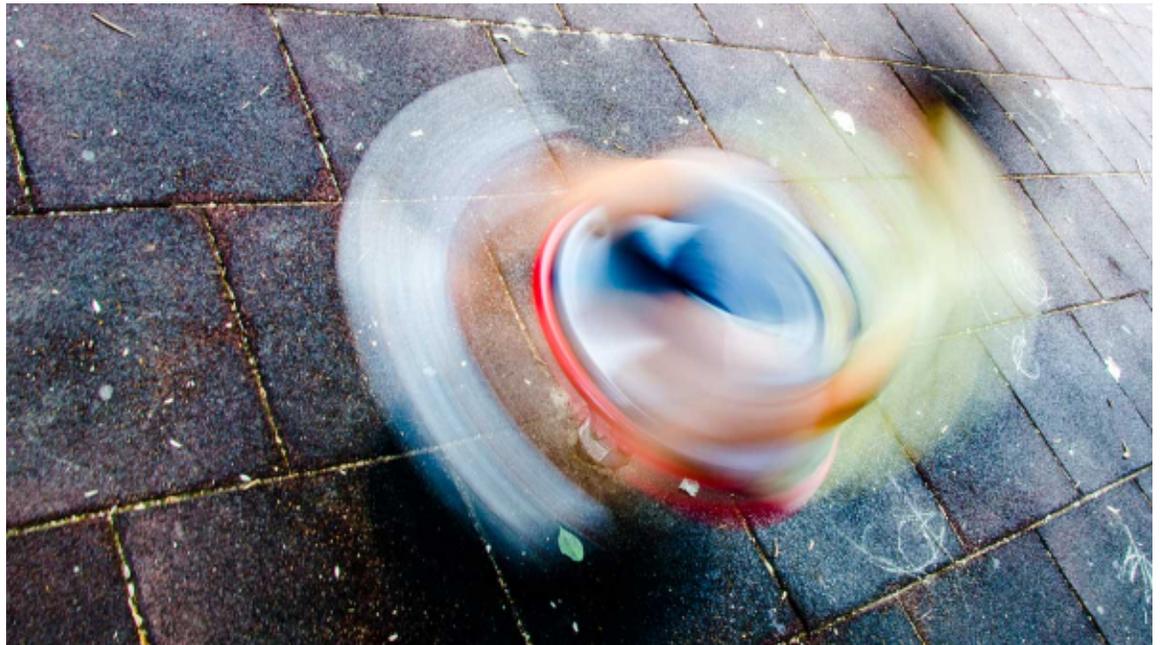
How Leaders Can Let Go Without Losing Control

by Mark Bonchek

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Massive flocks of starlings, known as [murmurations](#), exhibit a rare combination of speed and scale. The birds coordinate themselves with remarkable agility to find food and avoid attacks. [Schools of fish](#) do the same.

What's noteworthy in these murmurations is the lack of a leader. Instead, each bird follows three [simple rules](#): (1) move to the center, (2) follow your neighbor, and (3) don't collide. The rules enable each bird to act independently while ensuring the group acts cohesively.

Every organization today wants to achieve both alignment and autonomy. Can what works for birds and fish also work for people? The answer comes from a surprising place: the battlefield.

Over centuries, the military has developed an approach to managing “[the fog of war](#).” Generals need to ensure alignment to the strategy, while soldiers need autonomy to respond to changing conditions. The military’s solution has two parts:

- [Commander’s Intent](#) declares the purpose of an operation and the conditions for success.
- [Doctrine](#) determines how soldiers make decisions towards the fulfillment of that purpose.

The formal definition of doctrine is important: “Fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application.”

For a flock of birds, the intent is to reach their breeding grounds. This means finding food, staying on course, and staying alive. The three simple rules are the doctrine for the flock. They don’t tell the bird which way to go, but rather guide them on what action to take (move to the center, follow one’s neighbor). In terms of doctrine they are the “principles [that] guide actions in support of objectives.”

We can find doctrine in other places besides the battlefield, namely constitutional democracies. For example, in the U.S., the Declaration of Independence describes an intent of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” There are also numerous laws, rules, and regulations that specify what citizens can and can’t do. In between, the Constitution serves as doctrine. It is “authoritative but requires judgment in application.” In fact, an entire branch of government is tasked with its interpretation and application.

Turning to business, we find doctrine to be noticeably missing. Every organization has its mission, goals, and strategies to tell people where to go. They also have rules, policies, and procedures that tell people what to do. But few organizations have comprehensive, communicated, and contextualized doctrine to empower decision-making across the organization.

Without doctrine, it’s impossible for managers to let go without losing control. Instead, leaders must rely on active oversight and supervision. The opportunity is to replace processes that control behavior with principles that empower decision-making.

Although rare, there are companies that have made the shift from process to principles-based management. Wikipedia has its [five pillars](#). Red Hat has embraced [open source principles](#). Visa was designed to achieve both [chaos and order](#). Google has its nine [principles of innovation](#). And Amazon has its own [leadership principles](#).

Amazon says of its leadership principles: “Our Leadership Principles aren’t just a pretty inspirational wall hanging. These Principles work hard, just like we do. Amazonians use them, every day, whether they’re discussing ideas for new projects, deciding on the best solution for a customer’s problem, or

interviewing candidates.” Good decision principles help people make everyday decisions in diverse settings.

It’s important to know the difference between values, goals, and decision principles: *Values* are what’s important to you. *Goals* are what you want to see in the world. *Principles* are what help you make decisions. So “Frugality” is a value. “Saving money” is a goal. “Spend others’ money like your own” is a principle.

One difference between values and principles is their specificity. Principles can “nest” inside other principles, like [Russian dolls](#). Amazon has a fundamental principle of “Customer Obsession” and working backwards from the customer. This means different things for product development, marketing, and customer service. Wikipedia has specific principles for authors that nest inside the more general five pillars. The [Agile Software](#) movement has general principles that apply universally, and specific principles for practices like [Kanban](#) and [scrum](#).

Be aware that the shift to doctrine and principles-based management is more than a tactic. It’s a new way of thinking about management. Instead of making decisions *for* others, or delegating those decisions *to* others, it’s creating principles *with* others that enable them to make decisions for themselves. It’s a distributed governance model for networked organizations.

Current, a digital power service from GE, is on this journey. Like many other companies, Current saw the need to evolve its company culture. They defined their values, put them in behavioral terms, and built them into systems & structures. But as Bethany Napoli, global head of HR for Current says, “the action rested on the shoulders of leadership to implement. We were left with a system that measured what leadership defined as the ‘right’ way to behave.”

Current wanted a culture that could move faster and support exponential growth. So they shifted their focus from values and behaviors to cultural tenets and decision principles. According to Bethany, “The very act of creating the tenets and associated decision principles is what creates the promise of real and organic culture change. We are on a path to change from the typical pattern of creating culture by defining attributes and managing them through systems and structures to organically building it through dialog, empowerment, and engagement.”

To get started on the journey, take these steps:

1. **Purpose:** Re-examine your mission. Is it truly a [shared purpose](#)? Do you have a [narrative](#) that explains how that purpose will be fulfilled?
2. **Principles:** Start with your existing values. Transform them into decision principles. Then find real-world decisions and reverse engineer the most effective principles.
3. **Catalysts:** Find internal catalysts who can help evolve the principles and help people apply them to daily decisions. Connect the catalysts to learn together.

Keep in mind that this is an iterative process. When decisions are made that don't align with the mission or strategy, take a look at the situation. It might be that the person is responsible. But chances are you are simply missing the right principles and need to create some new doctrine. The goal is to manage principles more than people.

By creating the missing layer of decision principles, leaders have an opportunity to let go without losing control, and to add structure without losing speed. It's a way to transcend the tradeoff between alignment and autonomy and to create a culture based on principles over process. It works for birds, fish, and soldiers. Maybe it's time to give it a try for companies too.

Mark Bonchek is the Founder and CEO (Chief Epiphany Officer) of [Shift Thinking](#). He works with leaders and organizations to update their thinking for a digital age. Sign up for the Shift [newsletter](#) and follow Mark on Twitter at [@MarkBonchek](#).
