

# Balancing on a Three-Legged Stool

Responsibility, Authority, and Privilege

The nice thing about a three-legged stool is that it won't wobble. That doesn't mean the top will be level enough to keep you from falling off, but it won't wobble. Ever try to play *Jenga* or build something on a stool that wasn't level? Not a formula for success.



I like to picture *responsibility, authority, and privilege* as a three-legged stool that I can build an organization on. To build successfully, we need that stool to be level. If any leg is too long or too short, our growth and stability will be constrained.

## Excess Responsibility

If a person is given **responsibility that exceeds their authority**, they can't do their job. Going to others to get every decision made grinds things to a halt. And if you've hired capable people to begin with, one surefire way to make sure they don't stick around is to frustrate them by not trusting them with an appropriate level of authority.

## Excess Authority

If their **authority is too much for their responsibility**, they become dictators, barking orders regardless of whether they make sense or accomplish anything. This is another surefire way to keep the wheels spinning in the mud and employee turnover rates high.

## Excess Privilege

Ever see a spoiled child? That's what you get when you give **privilege without responsibility**. If you want to destroy any sense of "team", start haphazardly giving away perks and entitlements. It makes sense to give a car to someone who drives a lot for the benefit of the organization. If they're coming and going a lot, it might make sense to designate a parking space to save their frustration and efficiency. But there should be sensible reasons that the "haves" have and the "have nots" don't. If the privileges are for a select few, there should be a line of sight between the privileges and the responsibilities that earn the privileges. Titles alone are weak links.

Sensibly distributed privileges will make sense to those without the privileges. We can understand how the privileges help the privileged person carry out their responsibilities. **Responsibility without privilege** (appropriate privileges) hurts the organization by creating unnecessary burdens on responsible people who could use the perks to benefit not only themselves but also the organization. During one intense project, the company I worked for provided a concierge service to run personal errands for anyone at any level in the organization who was working on that project. That perk made sense because of the unusually high hours demanded by that project.

The best time to get this three-legged stool in balance is before you start arbitrarily assigning responsibilities, authorities, and privileges. If your stool is already leaning precariously, yesterday was the best time to begin fixing it; but today's the second-best time! You may not be able to level it out overnight (changes do have to be managed!), but first put a stop to any new inequities, then you can begin unravelling the ones that already exist.

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