



Are You the Traffic Controller or Traffic Enabler?

From Eblin Group

One of my sources of entertainment on a recent trip to Los Angeles was watching a traffic cop masterfully manage a very busy Melrose Avenue intersection while a work crew replaced the stop lights. Wearing her white gloves and a bright yellow vest, the traffic cop exuded grace, authority, intelligence and confidence all at once. Seriously, how much of all of that do you think it takes to stand in the middle of a multilane, four-way intersection with pedestrian crosswalks on every corner and keep everything moving and safe? I'll make it easy for you – a lot!

With that image fresh in mind, I had an executive coaching client last week make the distinction between being a traffic controller and a traffic enabler. While I'd say that my favorite cop on Melrose Avenue was both controlling and enabling the traffic flow, that's not an option for most leaders. You can do one or the other but not both.

Here's why.

If you put yourself in the position of controlling the traffic, you're adopting a leadership model that doesn't scale. There's only one of you and there are only so many traffic-filled intersections you can cover. Your people don't scale either because they become dependent upon you to control or direct their movements.

If you choose the role of traffic enabler, however, that's an imminently scalable approach to leadership. In the short run, you scale yourself by developing a team of traffic controllers who keep things moving in their own intersections. Your job becomes monitoring the overall flow of traffic.

And, then, to scale the approach even further, you work with your team of traffic controllers so they, too, become traffic enablers. You do that by working together to create a culture and approach to work where people naturally merge together to move forward without constant direction.

How do you that? Here's a non-exhaustive list of essentials that you need to have a traffic enabling culture:

Clear communication and understanding of the key goals and why they matter.

A leadership team that understands their roles and supports each other's success.

Processes and systems that keep communication flowing and that keep people focused on the moving the metrics that matter.

Hiring and performance management processes that reward team players who take accountability for delivering on their scope.

People and teams that focus on solving problems rather than casting blame.

Simple, right? No, not really but that's the work of traffic enablement instead of traffic control. What other essentials would you add to the list? What have you learned about how to make progress on success factors like these?

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