



White Paper

## Give Your People the Why: Living the 97% Principle

By John Parker Stewart & Daniel Stewart

Years ago I (John) was teaching in a ballroom in a large hotel. In between sessions, I noticed the adjacent ballroom was busy with another training meeting of some kind. Peeking around the corner into the room, I observed a large UPS sign. That evening, after I had finished teaching, I wandered in the other room. They were cleaning up and I asked one of them, “So is this some sort of employee training seminar?”

“Uh huh,” the UPS trainer politely responded.

Interested in how they train their employees, I asked, “What kind of things do you teach in your employee training course?”

The man confidently said, pointing to a large banner hanging on the front wall, “Well, that’s one of the main points.” The banner read: Tell them WHY.

Wanting to know more, I inquired, “Who comes to this sort of class?”

The trainer replied, “Every new supervisor at UPS must go through this course.” A reassuring smile came across my face as I realized one of the most admired organizations was strongly supporting a leadership gem I’d been teaching Fortune 500 companies for over twenty-five years. We call it the 97% principle.

### Sharing Information

Today’s workplace has been characterized as the information age, the employees and employers as knowledge workers. Extraordinary levels of complexity and interdependency have become standards within our changing environment.

No longer can we hide within the predictability of a single line bureaucracy. No longer are our roles and occupations governed by stable job descriptions. No longer are we secure with the information that we can obtain on our own. The time for sharing information and knowledge is here. Yes, people can still obtain power by

Stewart Systems, Inc.

PO Box 1527

Lake Oswego, OR 97035

v 503.638.1106

f 503.638.4803

[www.johnparkerstewart.com](http://www.johnparkerstewart.com)

*John Parker Stewart is a leadership and communication consultant, and has been coaching and training thousands of leaders in Fortune 500 companies and large government agencies for over twenty-five years. Some of his clients include Boeing, Bank of Hawaii, BP Oil, Castrol of Malaysia, Citibank, Chevron, Durham Transportation, General Electric, IBM, Kennedy Space Center, Lockheed Martin, NASA, Nestle/Carnation, Pacific Bell, Raytheon, Thiokol, Toshiba, U.S. Department of Energy, Waste Management, ViaSat, and Xerox. John is based in Portland, OR: [jps@johnparkerstewart.com](mailto:jps@johnparkerstewart.com).*

*Daniel Stewart is a communication and organizational development specialist consulting and improving performance at companies like Avaya, Deloitte & Touche, and Starbucks. Daniel is based in Boulder, CO: [daniel.stewart@johnparkerstewart.com](mailto:daniel.stewart@johnparkerstewart.com).*

hoarding information. But, the shelf life of such facts and opinions is becoming shorter.

While the security and stability of management roles and responsibilities are increasingly more fluid, the answer to this instability is increased communication. The best choice to succeed in managing people and relationships is through the sharing of information and knowledge. This need is best explained through the 97% principle.

Here is a simple analogy. Assume all information in any organization is naturally represented as 100%. Some of this 100% is “classified” or is appropriate for only a select few. Examples of this kind of information could be sales figures soon to be announced to the press, private health data, or restricted technical information. This sort of data does not constitute the majority of all knowledge within an organization. In fact, it is closer to 3% of all organizational data. Meeting times, changing deadlines, conversations with upper management, and the rationale behind new policies are all included in the rest of the organizational information—the 97%. This means that 97% of all information and knowledge in an organization could or should be willingly shared with one’s direct reports, boss, and peers.

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The depth of this analogy is not merely making sure emails are properly distributed or room assignments clarified; it goes much deeper than that. Freely sharing information helps others understand the *why*. As people understand *why* things happen and *why* management decides to do certain things, knowledge is fostered, relationships are improved, learning is promoted and productivity is increased. Marvelous growth and commitment occurs when people know *why* things are the way they are. So, how does one apply the 97% principle? Let us illustrate.

### **The 97% Principle in Action**

One of the greatest accomplishments in managing others is having one’s people act in the best interest of the organization. If you want people to work well with others in a group, meet deadlines, and show commitment to the company, then never stop sharing with them why they are doing what they are doing. When someone understands the why, then ownership and clarity of the idea or procedure can be achieved. Employees will consequently have greater willingness to carry out the assignment. Let’s get specific.

Imagine that your boss has told you to do something without explaining why you need to do it. He or she might say, “Get the performance review completed by next Thursday. And, by the way, use the new criteria I emailed you.” A request like this has probably happened hundreds of times. How did you feel? Did you feel in control of the action or the information? Did you feel comfortable in passing on the instructions to your team? Did you agree with what you were supposed to do?

Now, imagine a scenario where your boss explained the reasoning behind what he or she wanted you to do. “Please get the performance review completed by next Thursday. I just got out of a meeting this morning and management wants the information soon. They are going through the organization and assessing where performance gaps exist. In order to better assess this, they have come up with three new criteria. I’ve emailed them to you. Give me a call and we can chat about them

before you introduce them to your team. We'll figure this out. Thanks for your help.”

How did you feel this time? The benefits of using the 97% principle are very evident in this second example. Consistently contributing to a continual information flow between the boss and his or her employees increases trust. Information gives one's people more control and awareness of what is really going on. Information helps free people from a prison of uncertainty. And perhaps most significant, it increases the likelihood that the request will be accomplished because it gives them a genuine feeling for being included.

Learning to give people the why can be a challenge, but what if one's boss does not share the 97%? How does one deal with this? The direct report can help train his or her boss to apply the 97% principle. Whenever the direct report receives information from senior management and he or she cannot figure out why the change has been made, the direct report has every right to go back and discover the rationale behind the request. The new directive might emphasize a new standard of quality, maintain a certain budget area, or announce a schedule change, but if the direct report does not know the why, then he or she should stop and ask the boss. If the boss does not know, she needs to go on to her boss, and on and on until somebody at the top of the organization says, “These are the reasons...” By tenaciously yet politely asking, direct reports can teach their boss how to share the why.

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## **Benefits of the 97% Principle**

Living the 97% principle enhances the desire of your people to share information with others because they know they have received the “big picture.” Studies confirm that employees consistently desire a leader who knows and teaches the “big picture.” Unfortunately, the studies are also very clear that this quality is among the weakest behaviors management performs. Practicing the 97% principle can lead to satisfied and engaged employees.

There is also a sense of ownership that can come from being included. Information flow is a primary ingredient in creating that sense of ownership. People do not enjoy feeling out of the loop. The more information that can be provided, the more employees will feel trusted and valued. Conversely, when information is no longer shared with employees, he or she can sense it. They feel less involved—less part of the team. A manager does not want to send a message to his or her employees that they are no longer important or part of the group. Keep them in the loop. They have a need to know; they have a right to know. In return, the employee will have greater commitment to the company and consequently seek to help the company succeed.

## **Overcoming Reluctance**

Now, sometimes people have a concern about how much extra time the 97% principle will take. They say they don't have the time to fully explain the reasoning behind a decision. However, they apparently have lots of time to put out fires that erupt because people don't understand or buy into their decision. Why is it that

people don't have time to do something right the first time, but always have time to fix it the second time? Explaining the why reduces misunderstanding and increases ownership and employee loyalty, thus increasing the likelihood that the delegated task will be accomplished as intended. These are the goals of nearly every manager. Fully expressing the 97% saves time and builds a stronger bond of trust between supervisors and their direct reports.

An insightful World War II story comes to mind. It was toward the end of the war and the Nazis were preparing for an Allied invasion of France. The Nazis set up a variety of barricades and machine gun bunkers along the French coast. These were strong and seemingly impenetrable structures and the Nazis took great confidence in their defenses. General Erwin Rommel came to inspect these fortifications. Rommel was one of the most brilliant and decorated leaders in the Nazi army. As Rommel toured the fortifications, he would hear the Nazi soldiers bragging how they were the greatest army in the world. At one point, Rommel stopped and responded to these braggarts. "We are not the greatest army in the world. The U.S. is the greatest army in the world." The listeners were puzzled to hear such a comment. Rommel continued, "The U.S. forces are the most powerful because they truly understand why they are fighting this war." Unlike the Nazi forces, the U.S. soldiers fully understood their cause and emerged victorious.

Greatness, however one defines it, is always accompanied with an understanding of purpose. Leaders at every level of the organization need to acquire the ability to share the why. Knowing the why behind the what, gives direction and a foundation from which to act. It increases the chance for relevant innovation and creativity. It builds mutual trust and fosters clear communication. It leads to higher levels of productivity in getting the job done. It improves relationships and increases one's level of control. If you already follow the 97% principle, continue doing it and teach it to your people. If you don't tell your people why, start now? Your people deserve to know.