

A vital message for Partners of Professional Firms...

## ***HOW TO GET THE MONKEY OFF YOUR BACK***

Adapted version of an article by William Onken and Donald Wass.\*

Today's Partner of a Professional Firm has many responsibilities, not the least of them being part of the leadership of his or her organisation. But how can you be a good leader, if you are always taking, on problems delegated upwards from your subordinates?

### **How the problem begins**

Imagine a typical day at the office. You are coming in from the carpark, when you meet Joe, one of your Managers in the Firm. "Good morning" says Joe, "By the way, we have a problem. You see..." and he outlines the problem.

There are two common characteristics in this situation. Firstly, as a Partner, you know enough about this area to get involved, and secondly, you don't know enough about it to provide an on-the-spot decision. So you say "Great Joe, I'm glad you brought that up. I'm in a rush now, so let me think about it and I'll give you an answer by this afternoon." Then Joe goes on his way.

Let's analyse what happened. Before you met Joe, on whose back was the "monkey", the problem or issue that needed a solution? No doubt it was Joe's. And after you left Joe, who had the monkey? You did.

Subordinate-imposed time begins the moment the monkey successfully leaps from the back of a subordinate onto yours, and does not end until the monkey is returned to its rightful owner for care and feeding.

In accepting the monkey, you as a Partner of the Firm have accepted a position subordinate to your subordinate. You have done two things usually expected of a subordinate - you have accepted responsibility, and you have promised someone else a progress report.

To add insult to injury, Joe later pops his nose around the door of your office and asks "How's that decision coming?" This is known as "supervision".

Another way of handling, the situation that morning would have been to say to Joe "Fine Joe, why don't you send me a memo on that?" The monkey is still on Joe's back because the next move is his. But it is poised for a leap. Watch that monkey. Joe later writes the memo and drops it on your desk. Later that day, you pick it up and read it. Where is the monkey now? Yours. And the longer you delay your answer to Joe, the longer the monkey stays with you, and the more frustrated Joe becomes, filling in time with other things until he can obtain a decision from you. In other words, spinning his wheels until he gets a clearance to proceed.

Let's look at another conversation with Jennifer, who is your Systems Supervisor. She outlines to you a plan for new software, which requires the approval of your Manager. You listen to her plan, advise her to check it further with Joe, and then you say "Just let me know how I can help", as you move on to something else.

Here the monkey is initially on Jennifer's back, but for how long? You know you cannot do anything further until Jennifer obtains Joe's approval, and from experience you know that Joe may sit on this for weeks until he can get to it. Who's really got the monkey? Who will be checking up on whom? Wheel spinning and bottlenecks are inevitable once again.

About this time, you have transferred Suzanne from another part of the company to head up a new venture. You have said to her "Let's get together as soon as we can so we can hammer out the details of your new job. I'll write a draft for you to have a look at".

Now Suzanne has a new job, and full responsibility, but can do nothing until you write the draft. There is the monkey, sitting squarely on your back, until you prepare the draft and have the meeting.

## **A leg on both backs**

Why does all this happen? Because you, as a Partner, assume at the outset that each matter is a joint problem. The monkey in each case starts its career astride both backs. All it has to do is move the wrong leg, and presto - the subordinate deftly disappears, leaving the Partner with another addition to his or her menagerie.

Of course, monkeys can be trained to move the correct leg so that they stay with the subordinate. But it is easier to prevent them from straddling two backs in the first place.

Imagine if you talk with three or four staff members each day, and each provides you with a monkey, then by the end of the week you have between fifteen and twenty monkeys camped on your back - far too many to do anything about.

By late Friday afternoon, a Partner may be in his or her office trying to figure out why nothing has been achieved, whilst subordinates wait outside for a last chance to remind him or her that they need a decision. Imagine what they are saying to each other as they wait: "What a bottleneck. The Partner cannot make up his mind. How anyone ever got to such a position without being able to make a decision, we'll never know."

The reason that some Partners cannot make decisions is that their time is being eaten up making decisions for others, so that they cannot get to their own work, including decisions required by the Managing Partner or the Board. The Partner winds up in a vicious circle, preoccupied with everyone else's monkeys.

Perhaps over the weekend the Partner drives back to the office, to try and do the work which could not be done during the week. On the road, the Partner passes a golf course, and guess who is playing? The staff who gave the Partner their monkeys to mind for the weekend.

That does it. Now the Partner realises who is working for whom. The more the Partner takes other people's monkeys onto his or her shoulders, the more they will find to jump across next week, and the week after. The Partner will fall further behind.

The Partner resolves to get rid of subordinate-imposed time so that he or she obtains discretionary time, only part of which will be spent on "the care and feeding of monkeys". This cannot be achieved overnight, but with firm resolution, the transition should take only a few weeks.

## **Getting rid of the Monkeys**

On Monday morning the Partner calls each Manager into the office, and takes each monkey in turn, placing it on the desk between them so it can be discussed objectively. The Partner takes great care to see that the next move rests with the manager, even if it is only to have the monkey sleep overnight on the back of the manager. (Monkeys sleep just as soundly on Manager's backs as they do on Partner's backs.)

As each Manager leaves the office, the Partner is rewarded by the sight of another monkey leaving on a Manager's back. The Partner now knows that there will not be a stream of managers waiting for decisions: instead the Partner will be waiting for each Manager.

The Partner in future will say something to each Manager like "At no time while I am helping you with a problem will it become my problem. When you leave this office, please take the problem with you. You may ask for my help at any time, and together we will decide what the next move will be and which of us will make it. In those rare instances where the next move is mine, we will determine it together. I will not make any move alone."

## **Transferring the initiative.**

The principle of this monkey-on-the-back analogy is to transfer initiative from the Partner to subordinates and leave it there.

There are five degrees or styles of initiative. Starting with the lowest first, we have:

1. Wait until you're told
2. Ask me what to do next
3. Recommend, then take resulting action
4. Act, but advise what has been done
5. Act on your own, then report routinely

The best Partners focus on styles 3, 4, and 5, and never, never use 1 or 2. One method is to agree on a style or degree when the problem is first raised, so that both parties are clear on how much initiative is expected or approved.

You may like to frame the next page and put it on your wall, or You may care to copy it and hand it to your Department Heads.

### **The Care and Feeding of Monkeys**

There are five hard and fast rules governing monkeys:

- Rule 1      Monkeys should either be fed or shot. Otherwise they will starve to death and Partners will waste valuable time on post-mortems and attempted resurrections.
- Rule 2      The monkey population should be kept well within the number the Partner has time to feed. It should not take more than 5 to 10 minutes to feed a properly prepared monkey.
- Rule 3      Monkeys should be fed by appointment only. The Partner does not have the time to hunt down starving monkeys.
- Rule 4      Monkeys should be fed in person or by phone, but never by mail, as this almost inevitably leads to the monkey jumping, onto the Partner's shoulders. Documentation may assist the feeding process, but does not replace it.
- Rule 5      Every monkey should have an agreed "next feeding time" and "degree of initiative", both of which may be revised by mutual consent, but never allowed to become vague or indefinite. Otherwise the monkey will either starve to death or wind up on the Partner's back.

Three Principles to keep Monkeys under control.

1. Get control over the timing and content of what you do, by eliminating subordinate-imposed tasks.
2. Ensure that your subordinates have good initiative, and that they use it. Always agree on exceptions.
3. Use some of the time you save to gain and keep control of the timing and content of both boss-imposed and system-imposed time.

The result is that you as a Partner of the Firm will increase your leverage, multiplying the value of each hour spent in Management time.

*Based on an article in the Harvard Business Review December 1974 by William Oncken Jr., and Donald L. Wass. Revised and updated April 2016 by Peter Vroom.*