

Design Node Document

D07 MQIA Papers

D07.02 The Story of Uncle Victor: The consequences of not delegating quality

By Ray Andrews

Uncle Victor (Donaldson) was an Australian senior manager in a government-owned utilities organisation from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. He presided over 100 or so employees, and was a charitable, well-travelled, affable chap who believed strongly in two philosophies concerning the workplace: leaders should set the example for all others to follow, and middle management (from which he had graduated) was bereft of talent.

Uncle Vic was a charming man, especially liked by the women in his employ, because he was also kindly, always seemed to have time for a chat with them and even remembered their first names.

For those women who were a little older and had been employed in other organisations, Uncle Victor was something of a curiosity. This was because women in those days tended to have the more junior, clerical, administrative or routine jobs. So, when senior management took more than a casual interest in them, they were often suspicious that this “interest” might be for unhealthy reasons, rather than any altruistic demonstration of compassion, caring or career management. In other words, they thought there might be the prospect of an unwarranted or unwanted “romantic” gesture coming their way.

There was none of that with Uncle Vic. Straight as they come, was our Victor. In any event, his war injuries severely limited any plans he might have had in that direction.

The problem with Uncle Vic, as told to anyone interested in the slightest, was that he followed his first principle of management too assiduously. He basically did it all himself. Perhaps he didn’t trust anyone else to do things the right way. He was obsessed with perfection. He hated re-work, sloppy practices and inefficiency. Quality was the only thing that really mattered.

Uncle Vic recorded all his procedures. Few knew why. Was it because he thought that, one day, he might forget them and need to refresh himself on how he did things? Was it because he wanted to ensure that his successors had a manual to follow, so that they didn’t have to reinvent the way to do everything? Their errors would also be reduced. Consistency would be close to guaranteed.

Uncle Vic amended his procedures as he found better ways to do his job. He called this “self-improvement”. Apparently, many of his colleagues called it less flattering nouns, like fastidiousness, bureaucracy, pedantry and unimaginativeness.

Unfortunately, Uncle Vic never personally passed on why he so carefully wrote down how he did everything important to his function. He died on the job. Some unkind souls say he died of theory overload and boredom. Actually, it was cancer.

Uncle Vic left two legacies at that 1980’s public utility. One was a highly accurate set of up-to-date procedures on how to perform the tasks that he thought were either critical or germane to his success as a functionary. The other was a largely disenchanting 100 or so employees who worked for him.

The employees were an unhappy lot because Uncle Victor had not, in their minds, been a good leader. He had isolated himself in his office, doing what he saw as “his job”. Involving others in where he saw his part of the organisation going in the years, or even months, ahead was not something he saw as being part of his job. Nor was encouraging others around him to also record their procedures part of what he took to be his responsibility. Or if he did, he didn’t do it, for whatever reason.

Uncle Vic essentially had the view that, as he was the “boss”, everyone who worked for him would automatically do what he did and said. It must have been an immense sense of frustration to him that they didn’t – if he knew.

Uncle Vic was not an “includer”, an involver. He tended to set the example by doing his job to the best of his ability, as he saw it. Apart from social chat with the women workers, he was not a good communicator or team-builder. His sense of delegation was virtually non-existent. He had his job to do ... and so too did everyone else. As long as they did their jobs to the best of their abilities, like he did, then all would be OK.

The parent organisation sold off Uncle Vic’s division not long after he died. The asking price was way higher than the vendor was able to realise. Unspectacular financial returns over the preceding five years had dampened market. Most blamed poor old Uncle Vic for this. Perhaps he was to blame. But, right now, Uncle Vic is at rest, hopefully happy in the belief that he did his job perfectly. What’s more, he left for his successors a “perfect” set of detailed procedures so that they could carry on without him. The problem is that they didn’t ... and couldn’t.

Did Uncle Vic leave us a legacy? If he did, it’s probably this. There’s a lot to being a leader. Setting a good example is no doubt a part of it. Ensuring procedures that are important to an organisation’s ability to perform, and improving those procedures, then recording those improvements, are also part of being a good leader. However, there’s at least one vital extra ingredient – communication. That’s communication with the customer, and with the other people who work within the organisation.

Still, Uncle Vic is undoubtedly not the only one at the cemetery who was of the opinion that setting a fine example was what it takes to be a good leader. Exemplary leadership is a term we often hear today. There’d be plenty keeping Uncle Vic company who failed that test while alive. One suspects Uncle Vic is probably still setting them all a good example.