



"What were they thinking?"
Vol. 15, No. 10, June 2018

On the challenge of dealing with

People Who "Play Office"

A long, long time ago in an organization far, far away, I needed a parking space for a visitor. So I called "Joe," the person who controlled these parking spaces. (I could have described Joe as the person who allocated these spaces, but as you will see, "controlled" is much more accurate than "allocated.")

Joe told me "no," explaining that for this particular day and time, all of the parking spaces were already taken. When the day arrived—you know where this is going—there were, in fact, *several* spaces available.

A few weeks later, I again needed a parking space for a visitor. So, I again called "Joe." And Joe said "no," again, explaining that all the spaces were taken. As politely as possible, I noted that he had said the same thing the last time and, on that day, spaces had, indeed, been available.

This fact had zero impact. As I had expected, Joe did not change his mind or his decision. Still, before I could take a second step, I first had to ask Joe.

My second step? I had learned (an even longer time ago) that, when you have a reasonable request and someone responds with a perfunctory "no," an effective next step is to call this person's boss.

So I called Joe's boss and asked for a parking space for my guest. Of course, Joe's boss responded, "talk with Joe." I replied, "I already have" and explained that Joe had told me "no."

Saying nothing more about Joe, his boss simply gave me the space.

On another occasion, I needed a room. First, I checked whether the room I wanted was available. It was.

Then I called Susie, the person responsible for controlling (again, not allocating but controlling) rooms. Naturally, Susie, told me "no," not even bothering to offer an explanation. All I got was "no."

Obviously—as you have figured out—I immediately called Susie's boss.

She must have been familiar with Susie's pattern of behavior. For she didn't ask any questions. She just gave me the room.

When I inquired as to why Susie had not given me the room that was obviously available, her boss simply replied: "Some people just love to play office."

"Play office." Those two words capture too much of the behavior of too many people who work in large organizations. And it doesn't make much difference whether they work in a public, a private, or a nonprofit organization. Some people simply enjoy "playing office."

Some people "love to play office." They enjoy exercising their authority by saying "No." "Having access to this resource may help you do your job. But I don't have to give it to you, so I won't." Now it is your turn to "play office": Call this person's boss.

Maybe when they were children, their parents gave them the **Pretend and Play Office Set**. After all, this "realistic 74-piece set . . . includes a desk calendar, pretend stapler, cell phone with sound, ID badge and many other office essentials"—even a stack of paychecks." And what educated parent can resist a toy that has won awards from Oppenheim Toy Portfolio, Creative Child Magazine, and BabyZone Amazing Toy.

Moreover, the Pretend & Play Office Set is designed for children ages three to eight. Can't start too soon.

And even if you decide not to shell out \$35 (plus tax and shipping) for your child's personal version of the "Pretend and Play Office Set," the curriculum at his or her preschool might include **Pretend Play Office in Preschool**.

This "play office" includes, for example, sticky notes "because lets be

honest, what is an office without sticky notes?"

Indeed, the designer of this "office" reports: "This Pretend Office was such a hit with students. They loved picking up the phone to talk, writing memos and typing."

I wonder whether they also love practicing their authority by telling people "No!"?

Given that children are learning to play office at such an early age, we should not be surprised that by the time they are "adults" (chronologically, anyway) that they have mastered the real game of "playing office."

Joe and Susie were undoubtedly annoyed with my willingness to appeal their "No." to their boss. Still, what could they do? How could they retaliate?

When I again ask them for another parking space or a classroom, they can tell me "no." But they know I will respond by calling their boss. And given that I only make one type of request from each—a parking space or a room—they have no other way to retaliate.

Why do organizations keep their Joes and Susies around? Why does Joe's boss and Susie's boss have to devote their valuable time coping with their subordinates' fondness for saying "No." And if (for some reason) the organization needs to keep Joe and Susie around, why doesn't the organization give them assignments from which they can't throw wrenches into the organization's operating machinery. (Is Siberia far enough?)

Otherwise everyone has to master the game of playing office. **B**

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