

## Are You Ready to Lose Control?

By Justin Locke  
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We view control the same way we view pregnancy – it’s an all-or-nothing condition. Either you are in control, or everything is out of control. We would all be wise to rethink this – to look at how to handle and even embrace some lack of control.

The slightest loss of control often feels like it will lead to anarchy and disaster, but the challenges of managing, leading, and delegating require the ability to occasionally give up some control. Giving up control doesn’t necessarily lead to disaster. Far from it – sometimes giving up control will get you superior results in surprising ways. A slightly risqué – but absolutely true – story illustrates my point.

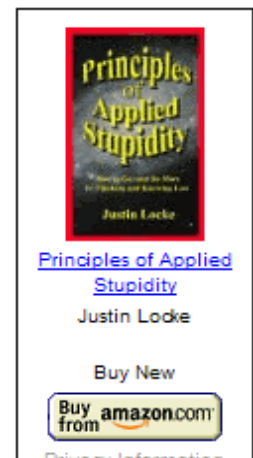


Many years ago, in the days of my wayward youth, someone told me about a nude beach here in New England. I confess I was thoroughly intrigued with the concept of observing young ladies frolicking in the surf *au naturel*. So a friend of mine and I packed up the car, and we drove down there to see what was what.

Now at this point I should mention that I had approached the whole affair with a bit of trepidation. The normal “controls” – rules pertaining to bathing suits, for instance – were all completely lifted, and there were no security guards of any kind. I had simply assumed that the entire beach would be one huge Bacchanalian orgy of lascivious behavior.

I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Sure enough, here was a beach filled with naked people. But while the average beach has lots of people who are running around, screaming, yelling, and stepping other people’s blankets without too much thought, this beach was like a library. Everyone was quiet, reserved, and painfully polite. Then it hit me: Because the normal boundaries did not exist, the collective sense of heightened vulnerability led to much greater mutual respect and general decorum, one that I had never seen on a suits-required beach. The supposed “loss of control” had spontaneously led to much greater mutual respect and, in a sense, even greater “control.”





I observed a similar phenomenon when I played the bass in major symphony orchestras. The less-talented conductors always wanted to be in total control, but the top conductors always gave up control. That way, instead of 100 people being limited by the narrow permissions given from one individual conductor, the capabilities of each player shone through to their maximum extent. If the set drummer was playing, he was in charge. If the oboes were playing the primary melody, they were in charge. When I played bass for Broadway shows, I was in charge of the rhythm. This power was not an opportunity to commit mayhem. I was being granted an enormous responsibility. The “team” depended on me, and I always responded by playing my best.

One of the biggest questions of “control loss” facing financial advisors is whether to delve into social media. There are many firms that simply forbid access to it, period. Whenever I hear of this, I just shake my head in amazement. Not letting people use social media (and by that I mean Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and blogs) as part of their daily sales, recruitment, PR, customer feedback, and corporate communication is very much like forbidding people to use the telephone or e-mail. It’s that crazy. Sadly, however, for people who see things as being either totally in control or totally out of control, social media is terrifying. They panic at the thought of the slightest bit of autonomy or delegation.

Let me make a shameless plug for a book written by a friend of mine, David Meerman Scott. The book, [Real-Time Marketing and PR](#), is written for those who are afraid to allow social media use by their employees and explains how you, like IBM and the US Air Force, can use it to great effect. It is about giving up some degree of centralized control and putting greater trust in your employees to achieve higher collective productivity.

I could give you numerous other examples of how, when strict control is removed, people will tend to react not with riots but with amazing displays of spontaneous responsibility and leadership. One is a broken traffic light. Ever notice how everyone calmly works together, and there is rarely, if ever, a problem? Another example is the Toyota Production System, where every worker has the power to stop the assembly line.

I hear a lot of arguments for exercising greater control, but in my opinion they are all just a smokescreen for something more basic, which is just a vague fear of losing control, with no substantial basis in logic or statistics.

I am not suggesting that we all give up the Constitution and move to a commune. What I am saying is, when you are managing people, you should not be guided by an ultimate goal of avoiding worst-case scenarios. An awful lot of people sell variations of burglar alarms, and there is a direct connection between your fear and their profits. So ask yourself, are you really being smart by always assuming the worst will happen if you don’t maintain total control?

Granted, if you are running a repressive regime, as current events have shown, Facebook is not your friend, but, assuming you’re not a Middle Eastern dictator, is the threat of social



media really as bad as they tell you? Unquestionably no. Besides, giving up total control may actually lead to surprisingly good results. Trust and respect are great motivators. Yes, there's always a risk of malfeasance, but that risk exists anyway, no matter what you do. The illusion of control is often just that – an illusion. But, I promise you, the gains to be had from letting go of some authority are quite real.

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