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## **WHAT MAKES A GREAT MANAGER**

*by Gerard M Blair*

*The first steps to becoming a really great manager are simply common sense; but common sense is not very common. This article suggests some common-sense ideas on the subject of great management.*

The major problem when you start to manage is that you do not actually think about management issues because you do not recognize them. Put simply, things normally go wrong not because you are stupid but only because you have never thought about it. Management is about pausing to ask yourself the right questions so that your common sense can provide the answers.

When you gain managerial responsibility, your first option is the easy option: do what is expected of you. You are new at the job, so people will understand. You can learn (slowly) by your mistakes and probably you will try to devote as much time as possible to the rest of your work (which is what you were good at anyway). Those extra little "management" problems are just common sense, so try to deal with them when they come up.

Your second option is far more exciting: find an empty telephone box, put on a cape and bright-red underpants, and become a SuperManager.

When you become a manager, you gain control over your own work; not all of it, but some of it. You can change things. You can do things differently. You actually have the authority to make a huge impact upon the way in which your staff work. You can shape your own work environment.

In a large company, your options may be limited by the existing corporate culture - and my advice to you is to act like a crab: face directly into the main thrust of corporate policy, and make changes sideways. You do not want to fight the system, but rather to work better within it. In a small company, your options are possibly much wider (since custom is often less rigid) and the impact that you and your team has upon the company's success is proportionately much greater. Thus once you start working well, this will be quickly recognized and nothing gains faster approval than success. But wherever you work, do not be put off by the surprise colleagues will show when you first get serious about managing well.

### **STARTING A REVOLUTION**

The idea of starting alone, however, may be daunting to you; you may not see yourself as a David against the Goliath of other peoples' (low) expectations. The bad news is that you will meet resistance to change. Your salvation lies in convincing your team (who are most effected) that what you are doing can only do them good, and in convincing everyone else that it can do them no harm. The good news is that soon others might follow you.

There is precedent for this. For instance, when a British firm called Unipart wanted to introduce Japanese methods (Honda's to be precise) into their Oxford plant (*The Economist* - 11th April 1992 - page 89) they sent a small team to Japan to learn what exactly this meant. On their return, they were mocked by their workmates who saw them as management pawns. So instead they were formed into their own team and sent to work in a corner of the plant where they applied their new knowledge in isolation. Slowly, but surely, their example (and missionary zeal) spread through the factory and changes followed. Now Unipart have opened a new factory and the general manager of the first factory attributes the success to "releasing talent already on the shop floor". Of course one can always find case studies to support any management idea, but it does exemplify the potential of a small cell of dedicated zealots - led by you.

### **THREE FACES OF A MANAGER**

The manager of a small team has three major roles to play:

### **Planner**

A Manager has to take a long-term view; indeed, the higher you rise, the further you will have to look. While a team member will be working towards known and established goals, the manager must look further ahead so that these goals are selected wisely. By thinking about the eventual consequences of different plans, the manager selects the optimal plan for the team and implements it. By taking account of the needs not only of the next project but the project after that, the manager ensures that work is not repeated nor problems tackled too late, and that the necessary resources are allocated and arranged.

### **Provider**

The Manager has access to information and materials which the team needs. Often he/she has the authority or influence to acquire things which no one else in the team could. This role for the manager is important simply because no one else can do the job; there is some authority which the manager holds uniquely within the team, and the manager must exercise this to help the team to work.

### **Protector**

The team needs security from the vagaries of less enlightened managers. In any company, there are short-term excitements which can deflect the work-force from the important issues. The manager should be there to guard against these and to protect the team. If a new project emerges which is to be given to your team, you are responsible for costing it (especially in terms of time) so that your team is not given an impossible deadline. If someone in your team brings forward a good plan, you must ensure that it receives a fair hearing and that your team knows and understands the outcome. If someone in your team has a problem at work, you have to deal with it.

### **Version Two**

That was rather formal. If you like formal, then you are happy. If you do not like formal then here is an alternative answer, a manager should provide:

#### **VISION - VALUES - VERVE**

Vision in that the future must be seen and communicated to the team; Values in that the team needs a unifying code of practice which supports and enhances co-operation; Verve in that positive enthusiasm is the best way of making the work exciting and fun. If you do not think your work is exciting, then we have found a problem. A better word than Verve might be *Chutzpah* (except that it does not begin with a "V") which means "shameless audacity". Is that not refreshing? Inspiring even? A manager should dare to do what he/she has decided to do and to do it with confidence and pride.

### **VISION**

One of the most cited characteristics of successful managers is that of vision. Of all the concepts in modern management, this is the one about which the most has been written. Of course different writers use it in different ways. One usage brings it to mean clairvoyance as in: "she had great vision in foreseeing the demise of that market". This meaning is of no use to you since crystal balls are only validated by hindsight and this article is concerned with your future.

The meaning of vision which concerns you as a manager is: a vivid idea of what the future should be. This has nothing to do with prediction but everything to do with hope. It is a focus for the team's activity, which provides sustained long-term motivation and which unites your team. A vision has to be something sufficiently exciting to bind your team with you in common purpose. This implies two things:

- you need to decide where your team is headed
- you have to communicate that vision to them

Communicating a vision is not simply a case of painting it in large red letters across your office wall (although, as a stunt, this actually might be quite effective), but rather bringing the whole team to perceive your vision and to begin to share it with you. A vision, to be worthy, must become a guiding principle for the decision and actions of your group.

Now, this vision thing, it is still a rather nebulous concept, hard to pin down, hard to define usefully; a vision may even be impractical (like "zero defects"). And so there is an extra stage which assists in its communication: once you have identified your vision, you can illustrate it with a concrete goal, a *mission*. Which leads to the creation of the famous "mission statement". Let us consider first what is a mission, and then return to a vision.

A mission has two important qualities:

- it should be tough, but achievable given sufficient effort
- it must be possible to tell when it has been achieved

To maintain an impetus, it might also have a time limit so that people can pace their activity rather than getting winded in the initial push. The scope of your vision depends upon how high you have risen in the management structure, and so also does the time limit on your mission statement. Heads of multinational corporations must take a longer view of the future than the project leader in divisional recruitment; the former may be looking at a strategy for the next twenty-five years, the latter may be concerned with attracting the current crop of senior school children for employment in two-three years. Thus a new manager will want a mission which can be achieved within one or two years.

If you are stuck for a mission, think about using Quality as a focus since this is something on which you can build. Similarly, any aspects of *great* management which are not habitual in your team at the moment could be exemplified in a mission statement. For instance, if your team is in product design, your mission might be to fully automate the test procedures by the next product release; or more generally, your team mission might be to reduce the time spent in meetings by half within six months.

Once you have established a few possible mission statements, you can try to communicate (or decide upon) your *vision*. This articulates your underlying philosophy in wanting the outcomes you desire. Not, please note, the ones you think you *should* desire but an honest statement of personal motivation; for it is only the latter which you will follow with conviction and so of which you will convince others. In general, your vision should be unfinishable, with no time limit, and inspirational; it is the driving force which continues even when the mission statement has been achieved. Even so, it can be quite simple: Walt Disney's vision was "to make people happy". As a manager, yours might be something a little closer to your own team: mine is "to make working here exciting".

There is no real call to make a public announcement of your vision or to place it on the notice board. Such affairs are quite common now, and normally attract mirth and disdain. If your vision is not communicated to your team by what you say and do, then you are not applying it yourself. It is *your* driving motivation - once you have identified it, act on it in every decision you make.

## PRESCIENCE

Prescience is something for which you really have to work at. Prescience is having foreknowledge of the future. Particularly as a Protector, you have to know in advance the external events which impact upon your team. The key is *information* and there are three type:

- information you hear (tit-bits about travel, meetings, etc)
- information you gather (minutes of meetings, financial figure, etc)
- information you infer (*if* this happens *then* my team will need ...)

Information is absolutely vital. Surveys of decision making in companies reveal that the rapid and decisive decisions normally stem not from intuitive and extraordinary leadership but rather from the existence of an established information system covering the relevant data. Managers who know the full information can quickly reach an informed decision.

The influences upon you and your team stem mostly from within the company and this is where you must establish an active interest. Let us put that another way: if you do not keep your eyes open you are failing in your role as

Protector to you team. Thus if your manager comes back from an important meeting, sit down with him/her afterwards and have a chat. There is no need to employ subterfuge, merely ask questions. If there are answers, you hear them; if there are none, you know to investigate elsewhere. If you can provide your manager with suggestions/ideas then you will benefit from his/her gratitude and future confidence(s). You should also talk to people in other departments; and never forget the secretaries who are normally the first to know everything.

Now some people love this aspect of the job, it makes them feel like politicians or espionage agents; others hate it, for exactly the same reasons. The point is that it must be done or you will be unprepared; but do not let it become a obsession.

Gathering information is not enough on its own: you have to process it and be aware of implications. The trick is to try to predict the next logical step from any changes you see. This can get very complicated, so try to restrict yourself to guessing one step only. Thus if the sales figures show a tailing off for the current product (and there are mutterings about the competition) then if you are in development, you might expect to be pressured for tighter schedules; if you are in publicity, then there may soon be a request for launch material; if you are in sales, you might be asked to establish potential demand and practical pricing levels. Since you know this, you can have the information ready (or a schedule defence prepared) for when it is first requested, and you and your team will shine.

Another way of generating information is to play "what if" games. There are dreadfully scientific ways of performing this sort of analysis, but reasonably you do not have the time. The sort of work this article is suggesting is that you, with your team or other managers (or both), play "what if" over coffee now and then. All you have to do is to postulate a novel question and see how it runs.

A productive variation on the "what if" game is to ask: "what can go wrong?" By deliberately trying to identify potential problems at the onset, you will prevent many and compensate for many more. Set aside specific time to do this type of thinking. Call it *contingency planning* and put in in your diary as a regular appointment.

## **FLEXIBILITY**

One of the main challenges in management is in avoiding pat answers to everyday questions. There is nothing so dull, for you and your team, as you pulling out the same answer to every situation. It is also wrong. Each situation, and each person, is unique and no text-book answer will be able to embrace that uniqueness - except one: you are the manager, you have to judge each situation with a fresh eye, and you have to create the response. Your common sense and experience are your best guide in analysing the problem and in evolving your response.

Even if the established response seems suitable, you might still try something different. This is simple Darwinism. By trying variations upon standard models, you evolve new and potentially fitter models. If they do not work, you do not repeat them (although they might be tried in other circumstances); if they work better, then you have adapted and evolved.

This deliberate flexibility is not just an academic exercise to find the best answer. The point is that the situation and the environment are continually changing; and the rate of change is generally increasing with advancing technology. If you do not continually adapt (through experimentation) to accommodate these changes, then the solution which used to work (and which you still habitually apply) will no longer be appropriate. You will become the dodo. A lack of flexibility will cause stagnation and inertia. Not only do you not adapt, but the whole excitement of your work and your team diminish as fresh ideas are lacking or lost.

Without detracting from the main work, you can stimulate your team with *changes of focus*. This includes drives for specific quality improvements, mission statements, team building activities, delegated authority, and so on. You have to decide how often to "raise excitement" about new issues. On the one hand, too many focuses may distract or prevent the attainment of any one; on the other hand, changes in focus keep them fresh and maintain the excitement.

By practising this philosophy yourself, you also stimulate fresh ideas from your team because they see that it is a normal part of the team practice to adopt and experiment with innovation. Thus not only are you relieved of the task of generating the new ideas, but also your team acquire ownership in the whole creative process.

The really good news is that even a lousy choice of focus can have a beneficial effect. The most famous experiments in management studies were conducted between 1927 and 1932 by E Mayo and others at the Hawthorne works of the Western Electric Company in Chicago. The study was originally motivated by a failed experiment to determine the effect of lighting conditions on the production rates of factory workers. This experiment "failed" because when

the lighting conditions were changed for the experimental group, production *also* increased in the control group where no changes had been made. Essentially, Mayo took a small group of workers and varied different conditions (number and duration of breaks, shorter hours, refreshments, etc) to see how these actually affected production. The problem was not that production was unaffected but rather that whatever Mayo did, production increased; even when conditions were returned to the original ones, production increased.

After many one-to-one interviews, Mayo deduced that the principal effect of his investigations had been to establish a team spirit amongst the group of workers. The girls (sic) who had formally worked with large numbers of others were now a small team, they were consulted on the experiments, and the researchers displayed a keen interest in the way the girls were working and feeling about their work. Thus their own involvement and the interest shown in them were the reasons for the girl's increased productivity.

By providing changes of focus you build and motivate your team. For if you show in these changes that you are actively working to help them work, then they will feel that their efforts are recognized. If you also include their ideas in the changes, then they will feel themselves to be a valued part of the team. If you pace these changes correctly, you can stimulate "multiple Hawthorne effects" and continually increase productivity. And notice, this is not slave driving. The increased productivity of a Hawthorne effect comes from the enthusiasm of the workforce; they actually want to work better.

## **A GENERAL APPROACH**

In management there is always a distant tune playing in the background. Once you hear this tune, you will start humming it to yourself: in the shower, in the boardroom, on the way to work, when watching the sunrise. It is a simple tune which repeats again and again in every aspect of your managerial life; if goes:

### **PLAN - MONITOR - REVIEW**

Before you start any activity you must STOP and THINK about it: what is the objective, how can it be achieved, what are the alternatives, who needs to be involved, what will it cost, is it worth doing? When you have a plan you should STOP and THINK about how to ensure that your plan is working. You must find ways of monitoring your progress, even if it is just setting deadlines for intermediate stages, or counting customer replies, or tracking the number of soggy biscuits which have to be thrown away, whatever: choose something which displays progress and establish a procedure to ensure that happens. But before you start, set a date on which you will STOP again and reTHINK your plan in the light of the evidence gathered from the monitoring.

Whenever you have something to do, consider not only the task but first the method. Thus if there is a meeting to decide the marketing slogan for the new product you should initially ignore anything to do with marketing slogans and decide: 1) how should the meeting be held, 2) who can usefully contribute, 3) how will ideas be best generated, 4) what criteria are involved in the decision, 5) is there a better way of achieving the same end, 6) etc. If you resolve these points first, all will be achieved far more smoothly. Many of these decisions do not have a single "right" answer, the point is that they need to have "an" answer so that the task is accomplished efficiently. It is the posing of the questions in the first place which will mark you out as a really *great* manager - the solutions are available to you through common sense.

Once the questions are posed, you can be creative. For instance, "is there a better way of producing a new slogan?" could be answered by a quick internal competition within the company (answers on a postcard by tomorrow at noon) asking everybody in the company to contribute an idea first. This takes three minutes and a secretary to organise, it provides a quick buzz of excitement throughout the whole company, it refocuses everyone's mind on the new product and so celebrates its success, all staff feel some ownership of the project, and you start the meeting with several ideas either from which to select a winner or to use as triggers for further brainstorming. Thus with a simple -- pause -- from the helter-skelter of getting the next job done, and a *moment's reflection*, you can expedite the task and build team spirit throughout the entire company.

It is worth stressing the relative importance of the REVIEW. In an ideal world where managers are wise, information is unambiguous and always available, and the changes in life are never abrupt or large; it would be possible for you to sit down and to *plan* the strategy for your group. Unfortunately, managers are mortals, information is seldom complete and always inaccurate (or too much to assimilate), and the unexpected always arrives inconveniently. The situation is never seen in black and white but merely in a fog of various shades of grey. Your planning thus represents no more than the best guess you can make in the current situation; the review is when you interpret the results to deduce the emerging, successful strategy (which might not be the one you had expected).

The review is not merely to fine-tune your plan, it is to evaluate the experiment and to incorporate the new, practical information which you have gathered into the creation of the next step forward; you should be prepared for radical changes.

## **LEADERSHIP**

There is a basic problem with the style of leadership advocated in this article in that nearly every historic "Leader" one can name has had a completely different approach; Machiavelli did not advocate being a caring Protector as a means of becoming a great leader but rather that a Prince ought to be happy with "a reputation for being cruel in order to keep his subjects unified and loyal". Your situation, however, is a little different. You do not have the power to execute, nor even to banish. The workforce is rapidly gaining in sophistication as the world grows more complex. You cannot effectively control through fear, so you must try another route. You could possibly gain compliance and rule your team through edict; but you would lose their input and experience, and gain only the burdens of greater decision making. You do not have the right environment to be a despot; you gain advantage by being a team leader.

A common mistake about the image of a manager is that they must be loud, flamboyant, and a great drinker or golfer or racket player or a great something social to draw people to them. This is wrong. In any company, if you look hard enough, you will find quiet modest people who manager teams with great personal success. If you are quiet and modest, fear not; all you need is to talk clearly to the people who matter (your team) and they will hear you.

The great managers are the ones who challenge the existing complacency and who are prepared to lead their teams forward towards a personal vision. They are the ones who recognise problems, seize opportunities, and create their own future. Ultimately, they are the ones who stop to think where they want to go and then have the shameless audacity to set out.

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