

Uncomplicating Management

Focus On Your Stars & Your Company Will Soar

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Introduction

Why Managing is so Hard: The Fear of Flying

Managing is hard—but managing your people does not have to be a struggle or be complicated. The people side of the business should be as easy and as fun as managing the rest of your business and it should never be as frustrating and exasperating as it often can be. Of course, you will find it a lot more enjoyable and rewarding if your people management results in a smoother productive operation, without risks of discrimination claims, and with increased profitability and performance. You will be a lot more effective if your employees are motivated and excited about their job as you should be about your own.

Why is managing so hard? Maybe because we make bad hires, tolerate poor performers, or keep deadwood. Maybe it's because we avoid confrontation, say the wrong things, or get confused by employment laws. And maybe because we complicate things, over-think things, assume the worst, and become paralyzed with fear. But the primary reason is we are dealing with people. As one frustrated manager told me “My job would be so much easier if I didn't have to deal with employees.” But we do.

Whatever the reasons, this book will uncomplicate the art of managing people. It will provide a blueprint for success in managing. It will demystify managing and will provide a simple means to lead your workforce. You will learn practical, easy to understand ideas,

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real life examples and ready-to-use tools to make your job easy. You will gain critical knowledge and skills so that you can eliminate the fear of managing allowing you the opportunity to create your own unique path.

What this book will not do is bog you down with the latest management fads and gimmicks touted by the so-called gurus. Managing people is serious business and you have no time for sideshows.

Don't Let Problem Employees Monopolize Your Time

Managing people is hard and complicated because we often spend so much time addressing the same problems repeatedly. Let's face it: managers spend too much of their precious time addressing poorly performing employees—the same problems or different problems with the same people. These same managers lament that they squander 90% of their hours dealing with the bottom 10% of their workforce. When they are not counseling or disciplining them or somehow trying to compensate for them, they are finding themselves creating new, complicated, tamperproof systems and procedures or hiring redundant people to simply compensate for these poor performers. In all my years in consulting, working with the Fortune 500s, or not-for-profits or mom and pops, managers regularly tell me how exasperated they are by trying to manage poorly performing employees. Why? Why do managers continue to do this? What was it that Einstein said about doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different result?

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I was meeting with a group of supervisors in a medium-sized construction firm.

These were rough and tumble guys who had worked their way up from operating heavy equipment and digging ditches. They didn't mince words, nor tolerate things that made no sense to them. Yet, they felt stuck by decisions made by their corporate office. They were told that even if their people were not performing—either because they were unable or unwilling, that they had to make do with them. They were told to accept poor performance because Human Resources couldn't find people who wanted to work in construction. Accept absenteeism, tardiness, and substandard performance because HR can't find people in a tight labor market. Talk about destroying a sense of teamwork. Talk about hanging your supervisors out to dry. Is that anyway to run a business?

Most organizations can not operate this way and remain viable. Let's look at some strategies for success. Focus on things that provide the organization the biggest bang for its buck. Whether it is new products, innovations, customers or services—your limited and precious time must be directed toward things that will generate the greatest benefit and value for your organization. The same principle must be applied when dealing with employees. Your top-performing employees generate more productivity, better performance, new ideas. They usually do it without turning the organization and you upside down. Why upset everyone? Yet, these stars often get the least attention from managers who focus on the problem employees. This equation must be changed.

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Managers need to reassess their thought processes. Stop trying to fix the unfixable.

To be successful, managers need to emphasize raising the bar in their organization and not coddling the bottom. When your focus and attention is directed toward your stars, you'll find your organization soaring upward.

General Electric under Jack Welch was famous for routinely cutting the bottom ten percent of his workforce who were not performing. Welch preached the need to differentiate amongst employees and then managing them in or out of the organization. No organization can remain successful when they treat everyone equally. Managers must recognize the differences between the top performers and the bottom feeders.

Focus on the people who make your organization work—your star performers. Identify who they are in your organization. A top performer could be the customer service representative who can smooth over any customer complaint; the engineer who can solve any technical problem; the nurse who provides extraordinary care; or the supervisor whose shift runs like a top. Whoever they are, identify them and focus your energy on them. Take care of them.

You and your organization can only be successful when your best workers are focused and motivated. They must be fully engaged. Their needs must be met. Each star is different. Most want challenging work, freedom and flexibility. Stars must be well paid.

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Sometimes organizations create internal personnel systems that undermine managers' ability to take care of their star performers. Often these systems are based on out-dated, egalitarian models which say everyone should be treated the same so as to preserve some perceived notion of harmony and teamwork. Such systems do not differentiate between the bright light and the dim glow. Nothing could be more wrong. It is better to treat the stars as stars and retain them, than to lose the mediocre over a fairness issue.

As for the rest of your workforce, managers must train and develop their employees, and provide continuous coaching in anticipation of creating new stars. Terminating the nonperformers is necessary when your best efforts to coach or reassign don't pay off. It is in that employee's best interest to find a place where they can be successful. And it is in yours and the organization's best interest to part company before the nonperformers contaminate the rest and cause your company to fail.

But should executives simply discard nonperformers? Some employees cannot do the job, others choose not to do it, yet the vast majority would perform if they knew how and if it were clear what was expected of them. Unfortunately, many managers simply hope that these nonperformers will somehow miraculously turn overnight into superstars. It just doesn't happen this way.

Setting clear expectations is the key to managing people. Employees don't instinctively know. They need to be told. They need to understand. And it is not enough

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to simply have them read a job description. Give them reasons. Explain why. Beginning the first time you meet the prospective employee in the initial job interview and every time after that outline your expectations of him and the job. Be direct. Be clear. Let her know what you want her to do and how you want her to do it. And let her know how you plan to measure performance. Clear expectations coupled with equally clear accountability standards, eliminates confusion and increases the likelihood that the job will be done right—just like you want it to be done. Remember, when people know what's expected, they usually rise to meet it.

Those who refuse to perform or who refuse to learn to perform and those who legitimately cannot perform need to find alternative employment in or out of the company. But for the rest, managers need to coach them to success. But how?

Be frank, candid and direct with your employees. This will go a long way to improving performance. An employee wants to know—has a right to know—when your expectations are not being met. They need to know how the job should be performed. Most employees will do what is asked of them. They will rise to meet your expectations—as long as you tell them what you expect and are willing to teach them. Remember, you get what you expect or tolerate.

Managers must be clear about what they want. They must frequently communicate both the results they want and the behaviors they expect. That means they have a right to expect the job to be done well with a positive attitude. At the same time, employees

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should expect that their manager cares, is willing to train and coach them, and will treat them with respect.

Remember, in most organizations, managers focus on the nonperformers. These are the ones who get the most attention—and these are the ones who cause all the problems, zap all your precious energy and who ultimately cost you a bundle in lost productivity, wasted time, or higher workers' compensation costs. These are the folks who, if they left the organization tomorrow, everyone would cheer. Yet these nonperformers never seem to leave without being pushed out the door.

You cannot afford to operate like most organizations. Take care of your stars, coach the willing and get rid of the deadwood. This is a recipe for success.

Take Care of Your Stars

So how do you take care of your star performers? For starters, smother them with recognition, pay, opportunities, and lots of flexibility. Develop them. Identify their strengths and build upon them. Recognize that they also have some weaknesses, so address them. Work with them. Create a performance program designed to move them to the next level of higher performance. Train them, challenge them and give them diverse work experiences and ongoing mentoring and coaching. Invest heavily in them. They are the future. Make them your priority.

Pay them well. Forget about those measly merit budgets. Most companies will make sure every employee receives the same amount. Why? Why would you pay a star the

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same amount as you would pay an average or mediocre employee? It makes no sense. If the world is paying 3.5 percent, give the star 7 percent and the poor performer nothing. Send a clear message to everyone: stars will be treated better and the rest of you need to perform like stars in order to be paid that way. Now, that means some of your marginal people may cry foul and may even quit. If that happens, so be it.

Provide your stars new opportunities and lots of flexibility. Study after study reports that to keep your stars happy you must continuously challenge them. Give them plum assignments. Put some stretch in them and then watch them blossom. They'll be happier and more engaged. You and the organization will be the beneficiary of their new successes. At the same time, be cognizant of their personal needs. Be flexible with them and never micromanage them.

Lavish them with earned praise. Sometimes stars are taken for granted. They're so dependable, do whatever needs to be done, and often operate under the radar. Take some time to recognize them for what they do and thank them for their contribution. It doesn't take much and it goes a long way.

Developing, nurturing and retaining your star performers are keys to your success. Without them, you'll wallow in the darkness with nonperformers.

Uncomplicating the management process can simply be done by refocusing your attention on your star performers. Stop beating your head against the wall by devoting so much energy and resources on your underperformers. Help them to improve, but

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when it's clear that performance isn't improving, say goodbye. Uncomplicating management means surrounding yourself with hard-working people who want to be there.

In theory, management is simple. Hire great people. Set clear expectations. Hold them accountable. Communicate frequently. And finally, take care of them. Do all that and your life as a manager will be satisfying.

But managers don't exist in a theoretical world. People complicate things. So let's continue to look at ways to keep it simple and easy.