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On Becoming A Manager

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It might have seemed like a good idea. After all the team had gotten off to poor start by losing its first three games, the coach asked that a huge stump be installed in the players locker room. Under the slogan, "Keep on Chopping" the coach invited players to take turns whacking at the stump. During a team meeting for everyone except special teamers, the punter decided to try his hand at the stump by himself. Unfortunately, his foot got in the way. The coach admitted the ploy was a good one; the team had won one game. The punter was, however, sidelined for future games while his foot heals and the stump was removed. While this motivational stunt turned fiasco has more in common with the Darwin Awards than effective motivation, it is typical of the kind of thinking (or more accurately non thinking) that managers will employ to get their people focused and enthused. ¹

Another manager, we'll call him Jeff, did not resort to trickery when he tried to help his team. He put his heart and soul into the work. The only trouble was the work he devoted to himself to was not his, but everyone else's. A gifted engineer, Jeff spent hours after work helping his employees with design and execution. So intent at trying to push the project forward, Jeff became the do it yourselfer on steroids. After a while, his employees grew frustrated at Jeff's meddling and just sat back and let him go. Sadly, after six months of too many nights and weekends, Jeff's team showed no signs of nearing completion. Jeff was replaced and the project went forward under a different manager, who shepherded the team and the project to a successful conclusion.

COMMON MISTAKE

Both the coach and the manager made a fundamental mistake; they both acted like players or employees rather than the person in charge. This is understandable since the coach had been an all star linebacker and the manager was an engineering whiz. But once they assumed the mantle of management they forgot the first rule of management: managers do not *do*, they enable. Management today is a process of providing the help and the resources to others to enable them to do their jobs. What the coach and manager did occurs all too often in all too many organizations worldwide. Managers think like employees instead of as managers. The results are worse than cuts and burnout, they are often the cause of lower production, weak performance, poor morale and career burnout. Often the heart of the problem lies with a manager not understanding his job. After all, he was promoted into management by doing whatever he was good at. The head coach was a former All Pro player and good defensive coordinator; the manager was gifted engineer with a talent for problem

solving and creative thinking. Somewhere along the line neither received the development he needed to become a manager. This shortcoming occurs far too often. Men and women are thrust into management positions for which they are ill prepared and the results can be disastrous.

There are so many managers that we take for granted what they do. But becoming a manager is a huge leap of faith. It requires a letting go of everything you have been doing in order to move into a role that requires you help others do what you have been doing. Instead of being an engineer, graphic artist, or reporter, you become a chief engineer, creative director, or editor. Those are important positions requiring management responsibilities. You have to *think* and *do* differently.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO

So what can organizations do to prepare their people? A great deal. Here are some key things to consider.

Develop. Grow your manager as you grow your employees. Managers are the linchpins of the organization. While they may be adept at their core competency, they need to learn the skills of management, such as planning, delegation, and evaluation. Keep them learning and they will pay for their salaries many, many times over. Forget them and they will cost their organizations many times their salary.

Educate. Send the manager to school. Most business schools have fine executive education programs. If those are not practical, check out the local community college. Many run programs for first time supervisors for an extremely reasonable fee. They are well worth it.

Train. While training and development (and even education) are used interchangeably, management training refers to the basics of the administrative discipline. Depending upon the field, the basics may include courses in accounting, database management, and inventory control as well as ethics and business law.

Mentor. Many successful organizations, such as General Electric, 3M and the U.S. Army, have very successful mentoring programs. Mentoring programs should begin before the manager assumes a supervisory position, but if not, as soon after as possible. The mentoring need not involve a senior leader; it could involve someone in another department one or two levels above the new manager. The point is to allow a relationship to develop. Just like CEOs like to club with fellow CEOs, fellow managers need to spend time with their peers, not simply discussing business issues, but also engaging in practical managerial topics about people and systems.

WHAT MANAGERS MUST DO

New managers play an important role in the development process. They are the ones who will make the difference and therefore must assume chief responsibility for their careers. Some suggestions:

Think. There is a famous photograph of Thomas Watson, Sr., the legendary CEO of IBM, seated at his desk under a sign bearing a single word, "Think." That Watson, an consummate salesperson and

inherently a man of action not reflection, would embrace the concept of thinking is revelatory, but obvious upon reflection. Watson knew that no matter what your intention, no matter what your drive, you could only be as good as what you planned.² And if you want to plan, you need to think. Think ahead. And as a manager, think of the consequences of action (what will happen if I do this?) as well as inaction (what will happen if I do nothing?). That's turning thinking into an action step and by extension a sound management practice.

Communicate. People need to know what they are supposed to do and what is expected of them. That is why managers must become relentless communicators who speak clearly, listen always, and learn from what they see and hear. Part of being an effective communicator is being seen as well as heard. Walk the halls. Eat in the company cafeteria. Good communicators also learn to ask questions as a means of finding out what is going on and also demonstrating that they care.

Administer. One of the least understood words in the management lexicon, administration combines the dexterity of a pianist with the deftness of a magician. Ministers from which the word derives are in the habit of managing the details of projects. The discipline inherent within management is the ability to get things done through a series of transactions.

Support. The role of a manager is akin to that of a coach. Managers cease to do the "actual work," i.e., the accounting, the engineering, the purchasing, or whatever. They enable their people to do it. It requires great self discipline to stop doing something in which you have excelled in order to take on a support role. In other words, you stop playing the game and you stand on the sidelines. The difference is you are not a spectator; you are a coach, helping the others to play the game to their very best abilities.


Reflect. Managers are evaluated by their accomplishments. "What did you do today" is the mantra to which most managers adhere. So much so that they do not take the time to reflect on what they have done and how they got there. The former president of Saturn, Skip LeFauve, an engineer turned executive, suggested that managers make time for reflection by scheduling it on their calendars.

REASON TO LEAD

There is one element of management that we have not discussed: leadership. It's been said often that manager administer, leaders inspire. This is true, but you cannot really be effective unless you do both. Managers must incorporate elements of leadership into their managerial practice. The most important of which is a sense of personal leadership; that is, the feeling that "I can make a positive difference." From that mindset, or really character framework, springs the sense of leading others. Leadership itself is about doing what is right and good for individuals and the organization. It is about moving people forward to a better place. This does not mean that leaders are pie in the sky softies. Leaders, like managers, will make hard decisions about people issues: hiring, job assignments, promotions, and of course, terminations. They must also look over the horizon at what is coming next. But, most importantly, leaders lead from a people point of view, helping people do their work and in the process achieve their potential. You really cannot have effective leadership without effective management. And often the reverse is true. Managers should aspire to lead, and leaders should respect the discipline of management because ultimately leadership is about results.

And that's the same as management.

KEEP THE FAITH

Becoming a manager is, for many, a thankless job. But with the right preparation and the right mindset it can be fulfilling career option, one that leads to powerful self awareness as well as a greater gift, the ability to get things done through the efforts of others. All it takes is a willingness to learn and a commitment to growth and development. Oh, there's one more thing. Keep your people away from all sharp objects. 

REFERENCES:

- ¹ "Swing and a Miss" *Associated Press* 10.09.03
- ² Richard S. Tedlow *Giants of Enterprise* New York: HarperBusiness 2001 pp. 187-246
[Chapter on Thomas Watson, Sr.]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Baldoni is a leadership communications consultant who works with Fortune 500 companies as well as non profits including the University of Michigan. He is frequent keynote and workshop speaker as well as the author of 4 books on leadership, the newest being *Great Communication Secrets of Great Leaders* (McGraw-Hill). Readers are welcome to visit his leadership resource website at www.johnbaldoni.com.