Case Study: Managers Can't Do It All

(Word Count: 1302)

To discuss whether "Managers Can't Do It All", we must first agree on what "Managers" are and what responsibilities the "It All" refers to. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a manager is "a person who is in charge of running a business, a shop or a similar organization or part of one". Additionally, looking at two different websites which answer the question "What is a Manager?" in slightly more detail, their answers boil down to the following:

A manager is a professional who has to manage or lead a team of employees or a particular department. Their work responsibilities mainly include hiring, firing and training employees, conducting performance reviews, making decisions and managing internal conflicts. Essentially, they are "the boss" (*What Is a Manager? Definition and Meaning*, 2022; *What Is a Manager? Definition, Role and Responsibilities*, 2021). The same websites also mention a total of sixteen different qualities that a good manager needs to have, qualities such as empathy, patience and positivity. From their definitions, for the context of this discussion, we define the "It All" as the following responsibilities:

1. Hiring new employees
2. Firing people
3. Training
4. Coaching
5. Leading
6. Communication skills
7. Decision-making skills
8. Conducting performance reviews
9. Determining bonuses/raises
10. Managing budget
11. Handling internal conflicts gracefully
12. Planning and setting goals
13. Building relationships

Certainly, managers have a lot on their plates. It may not be possible that everyone in a managerial position possesses all of the aforementioned qualities, and the role of the manager indeed needs to be revisited. In the HBR article in question, the authors claim that "a crisis is looming" and "the signs are everywhere", and that the role of the manager needs to be re-imagined. To back up this claim, they present statistics which point that the role of the

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proverbial managers may be on the decline, yet they stress the need for good management, therefore implying that the situation needs to be improved.

We are told that 68% of the HR leaders that were surveyed reported that their managers were overwhelmed, but only 14% of them actually took any measures to help them (*Gartner HR Research Shows Organizations Are Eroding Employee Performance and Well-Being With Virtualized Office-Centric Design*, 2021). Furthermore, several findings and statistics from different sources are presented. They indicate to us that a good manager has a lot of positive impacts on the employees of a company, such as increased productivity and improved mental health, and conversely, a bad manager can have a bad impact on employee engagement and retention. Thus, we are inclined to believe that a good manager is crucial for a company and its employees and that is why companies need to improve the conditions for and change their expectations of their managers.

The article also tells us why this is only a relevant issue now. It identifies "four defining business movements" that have occurred in recent times, and explains how they have caused rapid paradigm shifts in the role of a manager in terms of power, skill, and structure. To address these issues, the article gives us three new models of management, and to demonstrate their effectiveness, also gives us examples of companies that implemented them and the results that they obtained.

The first suggestion is to *build new skills at scale.* The article introduces to us a banking company, Standard Chartered, which has tried this on different levels and presents statistics in its favour. They renamed the title of their roles to "people leaders", created a new accreditation process and strengthed the sense of the managerial community. However, the article does not actually mention how these changes alone benefit the managers of the company, if at all. Another part of *building new skills at scale* is coaching. The bank implemented an AI-based coaching platform, and also took other initiatives to allow their managers to receive formal training as a coach. People who received this training then coached other employees and helped develop a "deep coaching culture" in the company. This is a really good system because in teaching someone a skill, it is not only the mentee who benefits but the mentor as well. Drawing an analogy to academia, often a mentor themselves ends up with a clearer picture of the topic which they are teaching. This is because a lot of thought is required to explain and communicate an idea intuitively to someone who may not be familiar with it. Moreover, both parties learn new things about a topic by having a discussion about it, due to the inherent nature of discussions. A mentor also gains confidence in themselves in being able to effectively teach a topic to someone else, because teaching (effectively!) is really the final test of one's knowledge about a subject. The article also tells us that the bank saw a positive reaction towards this initiative, as the participants experienced an improvement in their skills and confidence, and that the future iterations of their training programs for coaching were well received.

The next suggestion is to *rewire processes and systems*. The article provides us with another example of IBM, who at first, seem like they want to add more responsibilities to the managers than help their case. To make their managers more efficient and allow them to focus on more important tasks, IBM implemented an AI-based technology to do administrative tasks like approving expense reports, transferring employees to different units, and making recommendations for salary increases. While this does help out the managers, using technology to automate finance-related matters can lead to things like books being sold at a ridiculous price of $23,698,655.93 (Eisen, 2011) if it is not done with care. Currently, the AI technology that we have is technically termed Artificial Narrow Intelligence [ANI]. This is the least advanced of the three types of AI[1], is limited to performing a particular task only (hence the name narrow), and can be fooled by someone trying hard enough. IBM also introduced in-house licencing schemes for their managers, where a licence is required to do tasks like hiring employees. This method does actually seem effective, provided the statistics given by the article in the following paragraph (almost a 50% increase in retention rates!). Lastly, IBM implements a Manager Success Index metric, which helps their managers determine the areas that they need to improve upon and offer training programs based on it. Once again, the article provides us with a statistic in favour of this practice.

The final suggestion is *splitting the role of the manager*. We are given an example of yet another company, Telstra, which has implemented this change and created two new roles called "leader of people" and "leader of work". The system that is described here is quite practical, and this division of managerial responsibilities not only lightens the load on one person but also helps them focus on one specific area alone. We can see this system at play in not just companies, but armies as well, in a slightly different form. An army is usually divided up into squads (analogous to chapters) which are led by their squad leaders (analogous to leaders of people). It is the job of the squad leaders to be aware of the ins and outs of every person in the squad, and the dynamics between them, as they may play an essential role in a certain situation and in task delegation during a mission. These squad leaders would in turn report to a chief or a commander (analogous to leaders of work), who sees the bigger objective and is in charge of assigning missions and tasks to the squads themselves.

So what can a manager do in the light of uncertainty, contradiction and paradox? In agreement with the article, **not much by themselves**. A more fundamental and deeper change is required on the level of organisations, to help managers navigate through such times. It is thus

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[1] The other two types of AI are Artificial General Intelligence [AGI] and Artificial Super Intelligence, [ASI]. Currently, humans do not have the technology to make either one of these. AGIs are AIs that are as smart as any human. ASIs are AIs whose intelligence is far beyond human comprehension and understanding. This is the typical "skynet" type of AI that is shown in sci-fi movies.

important for companies to realise the importance of good managers and bring the changes discussed to their workplace to help their managers succeed.

References

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