

Patrick Forsyth

Building an Effective Team

Routes to Enhancing Team Performance

PATRICK FORSYTH

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

ROUTES TO ENHANCING TEAM
PERFORMANCE

Building an Effective Team: Routes to Enhancing Team Performance

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. Empty when half full) and light-hearted travel writing: First class at last!, about a journey through South East Asia, and Smile because it happened about Thailand. His novel, Long Overdue, was published recently.

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE NEED TO GET THE BEST FROM PEOPLE

Management's job is to see the company not as it is but as it can become.

– John W Teets

Let's start with a fact: Growing any business involves people performing well and delivering results. Whoever they are and whatever they may do, people must be managed. Management is easy, of course. It consists of little more than sitting in an ivory tower, issuing instructions and keeping an eye open to see if people need chasing to be sure they are executing them properly. Or so it may seem. If only.

Rather in fact, for management to prompt exceptional performance is no easy task, and it can prove downright difficult; especially so if the overall business or organisational climate in which it is practised is under pressure in any way.

However productive and creative a manager may be in their own work, they can never, through their own efforts, make up for ineffective performance amongst their team. Similarly, if you manage let's say 10 people, then taking action to make them all perform better in some way can be ten times better in improving results than just doing more yourself. The job of being a manager must be carried out effectively if overall results are to be achieved successfully, and this in turn involves many different tasks. Furthermore change is inherent. Management is not just about maintaining the status quo, even one that seems momentarily perfect, it is about keeping up with events; indeed it is perhaps about anticipating or even driving change.

It is on these kinds of tasks, and questions typically asked about them, that this book comments. It cannot review every detail of every management technique, but it provides practical how-to advice, identifying management's most important tasks and aiming to prompt thinking and action that will help you get the most from your people; surely a necessary preliminary to making any organisation thrive and prosper.

The management process, of course, involves a significant body of techniques (as has been said too much to be dealt with in detail in the succinct format of this series). However, if you identify the things that are key, and do the key things right then not half but most of the battle is won. Though management may not be inherently easy, it is made much easier, and the unforeseen and dynamic circumstances that it must cope with can be better tamed, if this is done.

So, here then we consider key ways by which you can get the best from your people, ensuring, in turn, that their future performance positively promotes growth, takes your business forward and drives it from strength to strength.

We start with some things to avoid.

2 AVOIDING INADEQUATE APPROACHES

First organise the near at hand, then organise the far removed. First organise the inner, then organise the outer. First organise the basic, then organise the derivative. First organise the strong, then organise the weak. First organise the great, then organise the small. First organise yourself, then organise others.

– Zhuge Liang (a Chinese general who wrote that in the 2nd century AD)

The time it takes to manage successfully can be awkward given a hectic life and what might be called being busy “actually doing things”. This is made worse if the manager is to any degree uncertain as to exactly what to do and how to do it. The danger is that ill-judged action reflecting these problems can short change the management process and worse that so doing can lead to action being taken repetitively that is less effective than it might be.

A particular danger is pursuing what appears to be a “quick fix”. Several approaches, chosen as perhaps the most common examples, can, in fact, cause problems.

Danger ahead

All the following might be described as forms of “ad hoc” management, approaches employed all too often and inappropriately. Such approaches include:

- **Doing something only when there is time:** taking action when workload permits “to do some managing”. But such activity must fit not your convenience, but that inherent in the operation and activity of the organisation and the team members. Failing to maintain continuity can quickly lead to so called “feast and famine”, a situation where bursts of activity are followed by inattention. As a result, one minute your team feel you are all over them, the next – after a burst of activity – they feel neglected. As many management inputs might be best regarded not as one off interventions but more like elements of a campaign this makes this approach doubly dangerous.
- **Convenient action:** activities favoured because of some particular factor which makes them convenient – *Mary’s got some free time this week, let’s get her doing some training exercise* – this followed by something arranged on a whim without proper context. This can seem like spotting and utilising an idea or opportunity, but easily fails and becomes a poor use of time because there is no clear focus.

- **Subcontracting:** in other words selecting management activity that you can get someone else to do. This seems easy, and is also easy to decide (everyone votes for something that will not involve *them* in any personal hassle). An example of this might be to assume that the only training necessary will be initiated by a Training (or HR) department and needs no attention from you. This can lead to areas of necessary activity, such as training, going by default.
- **Familiarity:** just because you may think something is good or easy does not make it first choice for use. It is very easy to find easy, but perhaps ill-judged, activity has become a habit; it is then possible to become convinced that all is well and nothing more, nor anything different, needs to be done (as with pointless, but regularly scheduled team meetings, for example). Constant review is always necessary
- **On offer:** training again makes a good example. Perhaps a course is offered centrally, staff are enrolled and then nothing more is done for a while as “the training input has been made for the moment”, even if the course was not on a topic that was actually a priority.
- **What is fashionable:** this is a form of copycat action and such is never to be recommended (of course you can copy or adapt methodology, but there should always be reason for it beyond simply viewing it as good “because XYZ does it”) – copying what is done in another department, for instance, even though it is not truly appropriate for your own team. Again this stifles finding what would be most appropriate and useful.
- **Perpetuating the same action:** sometimes a good idea continues in use beyond its sell-by date as it were, for no other reason than that it has become familiar and thus easy. Given a choice between more of the same and taking time to adapt or innovate, more of the same wins, and wins again, until the methods used is stale and results confirm this. The antithesis of this can pay dividends. A simple example illustrates creating change. Incentives can undoubtedly improve performance, but they lose impact and need refreshing as the same thing becomes boring.
- **Action unsupported by appropriate skills:** if the personal skills that are involved are inadequate to the task then any good will be, at the least, diluted. For example, if you are not aware of how, exactly (and there is quite a bit to it), to conduct a team meeting then such will never be as useful, constructive or motivational as it might. Honesty is necessary and research and/or development may be necessary to put you in a position to take all the action you want and make it effective.
- **Panic action:** this is never a good idea. If motivation declines or pressure increases and urgent action is required, then it is even more important than usual that action is thought through. Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted. Ill-considered action, which might reflect others of the approaches listed here, is never likely to work as well.

Considered and co-ordinated

Management activity must not be skimped. It must surely be done properly or not done at all. That does not mean that nothing other than elaborate and expensive action will prove useful. The reverse may well be true. But action must be well considered. A great deal hangs on it, so the whole process is surely worth some thought.

Within most organisations management involves a good deal. There is rarely one technique that works so well others are unnecessary. A mix is needed. Consideration, not least of what works best with your people, must lead to sensible decisions about which mix is “best buy” for you. Then activity must be deployed creatively – ideas are important to management which continues to be as much an art as a science. And the various activities must be well co-ordinated to get the most from them. It is this co-ordination that can help maximise the effectiveness of the simplest mix – where one thing builds on another, adding power and becoming a plan of action that is best for one simple reason – it is what works best to let you create an excellent team.

That said, let’s move on positively: what are the key things that make management work?

3 PLANTING THE RIGHT SEEDS

*Good management consists in showing average people
how to do the work of superior people.*

– John D Rockefeller

I have opted to review key issues under the heading of typical questions asked, perhaps especially by those new to management, though these are perennial issues valuable to everyone working with a team. The first question gets to the heart of the matter:

Is it possible to positively influence individuals' performance?

The short answer is that you certainly can; to which might be added the immediate thought that you must. Management is best defined as achieving results *through* other people. You cannot do everything yourself, you must rely on the contributions that others make and a *laissez faire* attitude to the way they work is hardly likely to maximise their performance.

Management certainly takes some time and effort; though going about it in the right way, and concentrating on the key things that influence performance, help keep what must be done manageable. But it can make a difference to results, and that difference may well be significant. If you have a number of people and are able to influence them all, even a modest amount, then the results multiply and may be directly seen in efficiency, productivity and ultimately in profit, growth or whatever else an organisation aims to achieve.

There is, however, no magic formula. There is no one thing, certainly no one simple thing, which you can do to guarantee a performance boost. If only life were that simple. There are, however, a number of things that can be done, which together do enhance performance and which also, over time, create a team better and better able to perform effectively and to achieve the desired results more certainly. It is some of this methodology that this publication reviews.

Management matters. While it does not just happen, all the evidence is that the effective manager *can* influence – and enhance – peoples' performance; so the first thing is perhaps to resolve to do just that and perhaps to set some targets and time aside so to do. It is worth noting that people do not usually resent management (some managers feel they are inherently being intrusive), they only resent bad management. Good management is usually welcomed as it allows people to do better and can see them enjoying their work more and thus finding their career truly satisfactory.

How do I recruit the best people?

Let us be clear: without good people any hope of excellent performance is in jeopardy. Recruiting and selecting the right people at any level is key. As well as having the right abilities, they must fit in, you must be able to manage them and their suitability must be good not just for today's job, but also for the future. Retaining people, good people, is highly cost-effective. So how can recruitment achieve this? In a word it must be done – systematically. This is no place for short cuts and expediency. Nor for subjectivity and hunches (even though we all like to think we are instant good judges of character and can spot a good candidate as they walk through the door). You have to get it right. This means:

- Being clear what a particular job and work entails, in all its detail.
- Defining the nature and characteristics of the person likely to make a success of it.
- Creating clear documentation (everything from job descriptions to any job advertisement or specification used).
- Considering the details submitted by applicants (which may need a well-designed application form to make comparisons easier) and short listing the most promising candidates for interview.
- Interviewing thoroughly, giving the process sufficient time and recognising the fact that the best guide to what people will do in the future is what they have done in the past.
- Making a considered judgement in final selection. Never make the (common) mistake of going for the “best of a bad bunch”, and always remember how much disruption (and time and cost) appointing the wrong person causes. You must be sure, even if that means the recruitment process takes longer.

Get it all right and you may come close to the old maxim that the ideal job advertisement prompts one reply from a candidate you are happy to appoint. If only; it is more complex than that. Along the way you need to consider a number of things: do you need to test for anything? (For example, if an ability to make presentations is necessary, get applicants to make one; ditto everything from speaking a foreign language to computer skills). How do you check references? Here an increasing reluctance to put things in writing means the less formal side of this needs to be given due attention. And facts? Some are easy to check - did they really get that university degree? Others need some digging, but note that a surprising number of people lie in their applications; certainly they will (unsurprisingly) seek to put the best complexion on things. And, important these days, are you as well informed about employment law and contracts as is necessary? (Running foul of the law is seriously costly and time-consuming).

Recruitment may seem like a chore, but time spent here pays dividends long term. With the right people in place, everything else is easier.

How do I encourage good people to stay?

You only have to think of the cost of replacing people to see that extending good peoples' tenure with the organisation is highly desirable. The longer people stay the better able they should be to do their jobs well; and indeed the more qualified they become to take on further responsibilities. Indeed their growth can parallel that of the organisation. So, how do you encourage it?

First accept that it needs encouraging. There may be other market opportunities for people and, even if they like their job, left alone they may get bored or see apparently greener grass elsewhere.

Then consider the areas in which action is logically necessary. If people are to be retained, then they must be:

- Fairly rewarded (and this involves more than simply salary: it includes a range of things from incentives to pension schemes).
- Actively motivated (see next question): so that they constantly find satisfaction in their work and with the organisation – and, not least, with the line manager – with whom they work.
- Helped to develop: to keep their skills up to date and to extend them so that they are able to do their current job well and become qualified to do more. The provision of active development is always rated very high in surveys asking people what they hope for in a job.
- Provided not only with a clear brief, but also with variety and real challenges (far more people move jobs through boredom, than ever do so because they cannot cope).
- Shown that there are long term career prospects: things worth achieving and about which it is worth taking a longer term view.
- Considered and consulted: no one will stay long in an environment that actively penalises them, or where they apparently count for nothing.

Having said all of this, remember that it is not a sign of failure to lose someone (though it may be to lose too many). After all, if no one in your team was good enough ever to get another job or ambitious enough to try, what would it say about their quality - and your management?

How do I make peoples' responsibilities clear?

Unless people are clear what to do and how to do it, there is little chance of their doing it well. The starting point is not the person, but *the job*. What does defining that entail? Every job should have a job description: a statement in writing that sets out the aims and objectives of the job, the tasks that make it up and the results it must achieve. It should also define what constitutes satisfactory performance and deal with a miscellany of other matters such as reporting arrangements, appraisal procedures and terms and conditions. Some of this may constitute separate documents from the job description, but they do go together.

The job description is often instigated by HR policy and rightly links to employment legislation (for instance, it is difficult to sever someone's appointment because they are not performing, if there is no clear statement of what they *should* be doing). But it should also be a working document, something that forms a basis for how a job is done day-to-day and how it is managed.

With the basics clear, documented – and agreed – then ongoing management activity should continue to emphasise what needs to be done, and to accommodate the day to day events that make up the work. A clear focus on responsibilities thus comes from:



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- Good initial analysis, documentation and briefing
- Regular and clear communication between staff and manager (including the ultimate check: performance appraisal interviews).

The whole process may need regularly documenting, and be enhanced by other activity such as staff meetings and motivational activity (of which more later). Above all remember that it is a manager's responsibility to make matters clear to staff. They should not be penalised for not being clairvoyant, and will always find clarity of intent and instruction motivational. If they know what to do then there is a better chance they will do it - and do it well.

Must I conduct performance appraisals?

Yes, you must. First, because employment legislation says every member of staff should have them (and thus not doing them can make problems); secondly – and more important – because they are part of the ongoing process that increases the chances of creating excellent performance. Besides they should be done in such a way that people like them and find them constructive and useful.

Appraisal meetings, most often an annual event, are the culmination of the management process that takes place through the year. Sometimes (often?) managers are uncertain how to conduct them and, as a result, staff can view them as unwelcome, unconstructive or irrelevant. But think about it: this actually makes the process a real opportunity. Organise it so that staff look forward to appraisals. Make the process constructive and make people value it. How is this possible? Well, overall reasons for appraisal include:

- Reviewing an individual's past performance
- Planning their future work and role
- Setting individual goals for the future
- Creating and agreeing individual ownership of such goals
- Identifying development needs and setting up and scheduling development activities
- On-the-spot coaching
- Obtaining feedback
- Reinforcing or extending the reporting relationship
- Acting as a catalyst to delegation
- Focusing on long-term career progression
- Acting to underpin and increase positive motivation.

All these reasons are positive and constructive. So too is a link to salary adjustments, though this is best positioned separately so that it cannot be taken as the only reason for appraisal. Their rationale is clear: appraisals play an active part in securing the performance you want from people, both short and long term. This helps you, the organisation and the people themselves. From a small regular investment of time (plus some initial set up), their potential is eminently worthwhile. So, yes, you should have them. You should view them positively, make them work - and draw benefit from what they change.

Perhaps the most important thing to bear in mind is that, while they review past performance, appraisals should be primarily about the future. Their most important purpose is to change things for the better in the future.

Note: If you are being appraised rather than appraising others, I have written more about appraisals in *“Career boost: Job performance appraisal: surviving and thriving from it”* in this series. This could well assist an appraiser too.

Can good performance be made excellent?

Realistically the answer is probably not in every case, but nevertheless your intention should certainly be so to do. There is one overall factor that can transform performance: motivation. Without any doubt well motivated people – those who not only are able to deliver good performance, but actively want to – will perform better than others. Ideally people need to enjoy what they do and making sure that people do get job satisfaction (in a variety of ways) is very much part of the management job.

Like so much in management, motivation does not just happen. It takes some time, and some consideration and it needs action taking on a continuous basis; but the results can be well worthwhile - they make a real difference.

Motivation is a big topic (one worth checking out); people speak of the “motivational climate”. This is a good description. Just as the temperature in a greenhouse can be varied in many ways (from turning on a heater to opening a window or painting the windows white to reflect heat), so the feelings of staff are influenced by many different things. The manager’s job is to make sure there are sufficient positive influences in play and work to mitigate any (perhaps inevitable) negative ones. For instance, systems may be resented because they are labyrinthine and unnecessary. A revised system may get the work done better and make people feel something is being done to make life easier for them. Such thinking can be applied to many day-to-day activities, and potentially can improve motivation and results.

Positive motivation must come through classic areas: people want to feel a sense of achievement (clear targets and knowing they are hit), they want recognition (tell them they have done well), and they want to enjoy the work, for it to be satisfying and even, on occasion, fun. They also like responsibility (organise so that things can be left with them), and they want to grow and advance (development, new challenges and advancement all matter).

The details matter, and many methods can be deployed, but never forget that little things contribute disproportionately. For example, in the last month, say, are you sure that you said *Well done* often enough? Be honest. Work at motivation. Make people go the extra mile, make them want to do so – and everyone gains.

4 DAY TO DAY CULTIVATION

You don't get any marks for trying, you must actually succeed.

– Sir Allen Sheppard

Day to day activities must not be just “going through the motions” as the quotation above makes clear. What management does must work. Again questions are used to review areas under this heading and suggest practical ways forward.

Do I need H. R. policies?

Having a policy means that a matter has been considered, and that the policy dictates a form or procedure for dealing with something that suits the circumstances and produces a positive result. So yes, you need policies in many areas and certainly well considered H.R. policy will help you get the most from people.

Having clear policies avoids uncertainty, ad hoc solutions and unfairness - all of which (unsurprisingly) people hate. It saves time if everything does not have to be considered and decided from a blank sheet. Any good policy should reflect an overall culture and attitude which should be constructive, realistic and clearly designed to assist the organisation to succeed – by carrying its people with it and equipping them to play their part effectively. Perhaps nowhere, in fact, is policy more important than in the “people” area. Bad policies, of course, can do untold damage; so the policy (sic) should be to review policies regularly to keep them up to date, correct and helpful.

This is not the place to consider what all your H.R. policies should be, but they should focus and prompt action so as to ensure effectiveness and efficiency. Even difficult situations (like disciplining or firing someone) can be made to seem fair and appropriately handled if how they are done is thought through and a policy is set out and followed.

Any policy should save time and avoid reinventing the wheel, allowing constructive and appropriate action to take place. One caveat: no policy can accommodate *every* possible circumstance, so exceptions must sometimes be made and individual action taken on occasions. So be it. Even doing this is made easier with clear policies in place.

Note: bad, perhaps outdated, policies can at best cause resentment and, at worst, do real damage, for example if they begin to be ignored and actions begin to be taken in a variety of ways rather than one considered the best (at least for the moment).

How much consultation is necessary?

The simple answer is: a lot. This is not just because your people will like it, but because it produces specific advantages and assists in achieving the results you need.

Consider these prime reasons:

- *Creativity*: many people are inherently creative, many can become so to a useful degree. There is an old saying that two heads are better than one. Constructive discussion in all its forms stimulate this (whether one to one or in groups and meetings). This area is explored later in Chapter 5.
- *Motivation*: people like to be involved, they like to be well informed and they like to understand. They also like to contribute and contribute broadly, perhaps beyond the immediate tasks they carry out, however well, individually. So time spent with people is always useful. It needs to be done systematically, well linked to the ongoing activity of the department or organisation, and have clear purpose (even if this is sometimes come at obliquely). So everything from a quick word as you pass on the stairs to more formal one to one sessions and meetings, including such one off ones as job appraisals, is important.
- *Progressing*: by this I mean the ongoing prompting and monitoring of activities. You need information from people as well as needing their contributions and ideas: you need to know how things are going and assess whether they could go better (either because they are not on target or just to make things better still). The best managers are well informed and involved with their people on a regular basis.

Consultation in all its forms, including counselling, development and more is a solid foundation to creating a successful team.

Note: Bear in mind the initials MBWA. Management by Walking About. The concept here is that management must not be isolated (some managers say *talk to me anytime*, then spend much of their time with their office door closed). The informal contacts with people it is suggested are as important as any other, indeed they can be systematically worked to produce information, motivate and stimulate ideas. Building in a little such time can be valuable.

How do I maintain discipline?

You must lay down the law.

First, let us remind ourselves that the expected nature and most usual style of management practiced these days is primarily consultative: the days of management just telling people what to do have long gone. Still, certain rules must exist in any organisation. These will relate to many things, and be as diverse as aiming to get something done on time or ensuring that no bullying takes place in the workplace. They are important and need to be respected by everyone.

Some issues present little problem. For example, in most organisations people are either honest – or they are fired (you do not give honesty 8/10 at an appraisal, and if the petty cash goes missing surely so does the perpetrator). Others are more vexed: just how much sanction is brought to bear if something is completed incompletely or delivered late? The nature of the something is, of course, relevant here.

The most important thing to ensure is perhaps consistency in the way rules are applied. Make people understand that if there is to be time to consult on things that matter, and such is no doubt how they want things to be, other matters must be dealt with in a way that wastes no time. If that means that little time will be wasted chasing up late forms before sanctions are brought to bear, then this is likely to be seen as a fair trade-off – provided you do actually consult on other issues, of course. If you do then reminders about this trade off go a good way to making rules be regarded as acceptable.

If the reason for action is clear, and the action itself is prescribed and consistently applied then little adverse motivation will be generated. What causes the worst problems is indecisiveness. If people see someone being consistently late, say, and the issue being constantly met with prevarication – then they resent it, seeing it as unfair to everyone. Which it is.

Think of the problems that can occur with such things as mobile phones and internet use within the workplace; surely such things are a prime area for some clear rules. Most problems of this nature are best dealt with by nipping them in the bud. Few, if any, transgressions get better, or matter less, if left. Rather the reverse. The moral is clear.

Note: there are probably some things about which there should be a zero tolerance policy. Certainly this sensibly applies to such things as bullying, but provided it is clear and described in a way that makes it acceptable, then such can save a lot of time and ensure that people toe the line in a variety of important ways.

Why invest in developing people?

Because they always need to learn (more) and because learning makes them able to perform better. And they like it. Sometimes surveys are done to measure how managers are thought of by their teams, and in terms of what they like *having a manager from whom I learn* always comes high on the list.

Make no mistake: development is not primarily necessary to correct weaknesses (though sometimes that may be necessary). It is necessary to take matters forward. It is to enhance abilities, to add new skills and to make people better able to cope with new circumstances in a dynamic and fast changing world; and thus to be able to perform better in future. You need look only at the developmental implications of the computer and I.T. revolution to demonstrate the truth of this.

Note: not only is the computer/I.T. area fast changing and thus development is regularly necessary, but also its development can have unexpected consequences. The best example of this is perhaps the use of such systems as PowerPoint in presentations: for all its many advantages, it seems also to have prompted some bad and common habits (e.g. people reading too lengthy text off slides while facing the screen and with their back to the group they are addressing). Such can prompt the need for additional training.

Remember that development (training) can only do three things:

- Impart knowledge
- Develop skills
- Change attitudes (which is the one that takes the longest time to achieve).

All are important; all are dynamic. The methods of taking developmental action are legion (and beyond our brief here), they range from getting someone to read a book – you can start by finishing this one! – to one to one time with a manager and complex ongoing training in forms as varied as a lecture led course or time spent logged onto a computer based training system. Check out the possible methods, set a budget (of both money and time) and make sure that development is an ongoing priority aspect of your portfolio of management tasks. Not least you should remember that those who work for you rate it very high; it motivates and can do so in a substantial way. Making development a significant, useful and ongoing process is a key element of the task of achieving excellent performance from your team. It is especially important that managers themselves spend adequate time on informal development activities rather than allowing all that happens to be centralised (for example via H.R.).

Note: some training can be relevant for a group, but other things may well need organising on a more individual tailored basis.

Finally, consider this old anecdote: what is the only sensible answer to the regularly displayed attitude to development that says: *What if I spend time and money training my staff and then they leave?* It is the response: *What happens if you don't train them – and they stay?* It is a sobering thought and this is an area not to be overlooked or on which time can be skimped.

How do I delegate when it is quicker to do it myself?

Here the question itself contains a fallacy. It may seem quicker to do something yourself, but this is only true momentarily. Consider: it takes you twenty minutes to do something, but you reckon it would take longer to explain it to someone else so that they can do it. But what if it is a task that you have to complete every week? Passing it over will take half an hour: a little more perhaps with some monitoring and feedback. But you will then save over sixteen hours during the next year! Worthwhile, surely: you need to regard the time taken to brief in such a way as an investment.

Be careful by all means. You need to choose the right person: someone with the right skills and aptitude. You need to set things up right: brief people clearly and thoroughly, check that they understand *why* something needs doing, precisely *what* must be done and *how* precisely to do it. Set up some checks in advance: *Come and have a word on Friday as you finish stage one.* Then relax and let go. No one will perform well if you insist on breathing down their necks.

There are significant benefits that come from delegation. Key amongst them, it can:

- Free up time for *you* to focus on priorities.
- Bring a new mind to bear on tasks that may then be improved, thus increasing productivity, customer satisfaction or whatever it is that the task involves.
- Encourage self-sufficiency through empowerment. Delegation is more than work-allocation; you pass on the responsibility for something. People like that, and will tend to focus on tasks better when they are *theirs*.
- It is something else that is motivational – and thus helps morale, team building and overall efficiency.

Given all this, why is delegating sometimes a problem? Time, mentioned above, may be one difficulty, but so too are we. Be honest: How many things are you hanging onto because you *like* doing them or consider that no one else could possibly do them as well as you do? Resolve to delegate more - and the positive effects on you, your people and the organisation might just surprise you.

How best do you communicate with your team?

Communication necessarily pervades everything about running an organisation and managing people. The greatest danger is that we underrate its difficulty. How long is it since you witnessed, or participated in, a breakdown in communications? - *But that's not what you said! It's there in black and white!* – What were the results of such an incident, and could it all have been avoided?

Examples abound: I once saw a notice on the inside of a hotel bedroom door. It said, *In the interest of security, please ensure that your bedroom door is fully closed before entering or leaving your room.* Just a single sentence but someone wrote that, checked it, printed it and had it posted on some 250 doors – and still did not notice its absurdity! Similarly a lack of thought can have a manager seeking opinion saying something like: *I think this is a great idea, what do you think?* This, of course, can influence the reply and have people saying what they think will please, rather than making honest – and useful – comment.

So, what is the best style of communication with employees? One that is, above all else, clear. And the best way of achieving clear communication is to follow the age-old advice that – *it is best to engage the brain, before opening the mouth.*

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Whatever method is being used – a memo, a meeting or of course the now ubiquitous e-mail – *preparation is key*. It may constitute a split second's thought, it may involve an hour sitting round the table with colleagues thrashing out the best way of announcing something, or anything in between, but it must take place. Think about how you communicate – make your messages clear, descriptive and pitch them appropriately keeping in mind the people with whom you are communicating (for example, bearing in mind their role, experience and nature). Think too about method: when do you need an email and when a meeting - and when a combination of both.

If you do this and communicate promptly (people hate being the last to know), avoid unnecessary secrecy (which is also understandably disliked, especially when there appears to be no reason for it) and give people sufficient detail and tell them *why* as well as *what* then your communication should be well received. The quotation below puts it well and is something to remember.

The ability to express an idea is almost as important as the idea itself.

(Bernard Baruch)

What is the best management style for me to adopt?

It has to work of course, but your style should also be one that plays to your strengths. Consultation is key so, if your natural tendency is to be secretive and dictatorial, then even understanding that it is necessary to avoid such characteristics may not be enough to prevent it being difficult. Certainly avoid being the sort of manager implied in the overheard comment below.

Overheard: *My manager's idea of consultation is to say, "When I want your opinion, I'll give it you".*

One factor certainly is a constant: consistency. The kind of manager who is unpredictable, illogical and runs hot and cold for no reason – sweetness and light one minute, doom and gloom the next – is what most people find impossible to cope with. You need to adopt a style that makes sense, one that combines getting things done with being acceptable, better still a style that is liked, certainly one that is respected. You need to display empathy, show that people matter, be fair, open and honest about things, and support people in every possible way. You need to actively motivate and you must regard people's development as a high priority. You must not play favourites and you must not try to do everything yourself. How

you approach other things matters too. Staff hate working for someone indecisive and this is a problem with everything, not just matters relating to staff. They hate procrastination – *Leave it with me (forever!)*. And they hate it especially when it affects them. And they also hate intrusive management, that is a style in which checking up is where most time seems to be spent. Your style should not prompt the comment - *The only time I see my manager is when something is wrong*. Rather it should be essentially constructive: it should encourage self-reliance and a working together that is additive and creative.

Your people are your greatest asset. In many ways it should be their work and their ideas that drive the business. If you manage them in a way that makes it clear that that is your belief, then you will be well on the way to having an appropriate style; one that is acceptable but also one that is effective.

Must meetings be a waste of time?

Only badly conducted meetings are a waste of time. And that means meetings with no clear objectives, where the agenda is conspicuous by its absence, ideas are stillborn and the chairmanship feeble. Sadly this describes all too accurately rather too many meetings, staff or otherwise. You know the old saying: *The ideal meeting is two, with one absent*.

But it need not be so. Good meeting can be informative, useful - even fun. They can prompt ideas, make decisions and drive progress and implementation. They are an invaluable part of the communications that drive the business and create success.

Meetings are worth some trouble; they need some preparation and some rules.

Key points to bear in mind include:

- *Objectives*: always set clear objectives so that you can say *why* a meeting is being held (and importantly the reason should never be - *because it is a month since the last one!*).
- *Setting an agenda*: this is very important, no meeting will go as well if you simply make up the content as you go along (notify the agenda in advance and give good notice of contributions required from others).
- *Timing*: set a start time *and* a finishing time, then you can judge the way it needs conducting alongside its duration and even put some rough timings to individual items. Respect the timing too: start on time and try to stick with the duration planned.
- *Prepare yourself*: read all necessary papers, check all necessary details and think about how you will handle both your own contribution and the stimulation, and control, of others attending.

- *Insist everyone attending prepare also:* this may mean instilling habits (e.g. pausing to go through something that should have been studied before the meeting only shows that reading beforehand is not really necessary). You need to help your people to actively develop good habits.
- *People:* consider who should be there (and also who should not) and what role each attendee should have during the meeting (maybe some people only need to attend part of a meeting).
- *Environment:* remember that a meeting will go much more smoothly if people attending are comfortable and uninterrupted (so organise switching the coffee pot on and the phones off before you start).

Then, at the appointed hour, someone must take charge and make the meeting go well. If it is your meeting, then you need to be a good “chair”, keeping the discussion on track and ensuring the right kind of participation from members of the team (all of whom may potentially be able to contribute). To keep order you only really need two (firm) rules:

- i) Only one person may talk at a time
- ii) The chairperson decides who (when necessary) and should prompt the contributions they want from the team.

Study how to make a meeting go well, be disciplined about making it happen and *your* meetings will never be regarded as a waste of time.

How do I address any poor performance?

First, be sure that it is possible to define what constitutes a poor performance (checking what was expected and what is documented in job descriptions etc.); some jobs have specific targets that make this very clear and that is a good thing if the role makes it possible. When performance is definitely inadequate, you only really have three options:

- Put up with it and do nothing (not to be recommended)
- Take action designed to correct the shortfall
- Terminate the continuation of the poor performer in the role (which could mean firing them or reallocating them to other duties).

Leaving the first on one side, and defining the third as a last resort (though one where you need to be clear on the timing – when exactly do you move to this one? This will depend on a number of issues, not least the culture of the organisation), what about the second?

Various actions – always promptly taken - may be indicated depending on the reason for the shortfall in performance. For example:

- Counselling may be necessary, for example to clarify any uncertainty or weakness in knowledge, skill or confidence that is diluting effectiveness. This may be no more than a few words or may take some time. Clearly this will vary with both circumstances and individuals.
- Formal, or informal, training may be necessary (in one of its many forms) to correct a weakness, enhance a skill or add something to a person's understanding or competence; indeed it is possible that such correction can be quick and straightforward.
- In addition, disciplinary action may be necessary. This might range from a sharp word with someone to full and documented disciplinary proceedings. Such is appropriate when the person is capable of good performance but is not pulling their weight. Remember that you need to investigate the reason (for example, some momentary problem – a death in the family – might take their eye off the ball but not seem likely to last).

Having followed this thinking, and allowing adequate time for corrective action to have the desired effect, only if all reasonable attempts at correction fail should one move towards the third more drastic solution (one that will then seem fair to all).

You cannot afford to accommodate passengers; and your staff does not like them either. Firm action is needed here, any kind of (unnecessary) delay or prevarication will not only be bad for others motivationally but allows the effect of poor performance, whatever that is, to continue and this could, depending on the person's role, be damaging. That said, action taken must always be purposefully directed.

How do I maximise individuals' productivity?

No one will be as productive as they could be without some consideration of time management. And if *you* are disorganised, then you can hardly blame your staff if they are too. One moral is obvious: you need to set an example.

There is certainly no magic formula for successful time management. It demands the right attitude and what makes it work is largely in the detail. It is something a team can work at together, however. For example, everyone cooperating to ensure that they arrive for meetings on time and that the common problem of time loss as meetings start late is avoided. Beyond that in this limited space, these base principles may help:

- Successful time management is as much a habit as anything; it gets easier if you think about it and cultivate good habits (or replace bad with good).
- Everyone needs a systematic way of recording an “action plan/ diary” and this might be standardised throughout a department.
- People must have enough information to be able to decide what tasks should take priority; and this may need guidance from you, certainly to start with.
- Deadlines must be clear (an office where everyone adds or subtracts time and tries to double guess what is meant breeds only chaos).

Time management is a real career skill (i.e. peoples’ effectiveness at it affects everything they do including their career progress). It is worth some study – and I have written at length about it in *Successful Time Management* (published by Kogan Page) and more briefly in this series. It perhaps shows the importance of this technique that the book is now in its fifth edition.

If all else fails and you want just one simplistic maxim to prompt your thinking, try this: *If it’s important, then do it – and if it’s not, don’t.* Or, as Henry Kissinger said, - *Next week there can’t be any crisis. My schedule is already full.*

How do I deal with any necessary staff cuts?

The new realities of the modern workplace brook no argument. We work in a tough old world: competitive, dynamic and ultimately uncertain. Sometimes things do not go to plan, defensive action is necessary and one form of that may be to lay people off. It is never pleasant to tell people that they must go, and calling declaring redundancies “downsizing” does not make it even a tad more palatable.

So how do you proceed? Consider two aspects of the situation: information and action. First, **information:** it is usually the best policy to be as open and honest as circumstances permit. There may be reasons (in the market and amongst competitors) for secrecy, of course. But sometimes secrecy may only be a way of putting off communicating something you are going to find distasteful to explain. People appreciate honesty and certainly they hate the reverse. Without openness rumours will abound, and dealing with that can be difficult, destructive and time-consuming.

So, be as open as possible, try and emphasise positive points by all means, but not to the extent that it confuses and seems like a lie. Timing is important too, bad news is made worse by having no time to make alternative plans, especially if there appears to be no good reason to have delayed an announcement.

Secondly, **action:** you cannot make losing a job sound attractive to anyone (though sometimes redundancies can be achieved in an acceptable way for everyone by offering an early retirement deal or reassignment that will seem attractive to some). Alongside this your responsibility is to the organisation and all those people who rely on its success (employees, shareholders, customers and more); so you must bite the bullet.

So the formula is essentially straightforward. It can be summed up as follows:

Be ruthless in decision, honest in explanation and benevolent in execution.

This means you should make the decisions necessary, communicate with care and be as helpful to those having to leave as possible (help that encompasses everything from assistance with job-seeking to the financial package you agree). Remember that there is a public relations opportunity here: handle things insensitively and people will say you are unfeeling (or worse). Handle things right and people will say you did your best. In either case the message may carry far. Besides, in some circumstances you may want to re-hire people you let go at a later date; if so, you want them to think well of you.

How can I minimise disruption when people leave?

Redundancy apart people may move on (for all sorts of reasons) and the greater the importance of their role the more inconvenient – even damaging – it can be. There are three areas to consider here. The first two can be commented on briefly. First, work to make sure that people do *not* leave when you want them to stay. So, motivation (and progressive rewards), development and much more about how they are managed are all important to successful retention. You will not solve everything this way, but it will help.

Secondly, when a parting of the ways does occur – do everything possible to make that parting happen on good terms. The worst damage is done when someone storms out leaving work unfinished, feathers ruffled and rumours rife. If there is time for de-briefing (and the useful device of the so-called exit interview) and careful handover, then at least some continuity will be secured, indeed this should be strived for. It may also mean that for a month or two after someone has gone there will be no problem making contact to check something – *Do you remember where the file on X is kept?*

The bigger issue that the question raises is that of *succession planning*. This is the premise that for many staff, certainly above a certain level and assuming the organisation is of sufficient size to allow this, there should be a nominated successor (if not publicly announced, then in mind). Such a successor should have, as part of their development, an ongoing thread

of activity designed to put them in a position to step into someone else's shoes should the occasion arise. This is not just for emergencies, though that may be useful too and one might include such things as maternity leave in this. Long term such promotion may actually be intended as the more senior person moves on (or retires).

Realistically, of course, by no means every job can have a successor ready and able to succeed. A formal succession planning policy, however, will minimise some of the problems at least some of the time; even if a certain amount of rapid training or briefing is still necessary come the changeover. One thing is worth a thought before we move on: who might succeed you?

Are employee share schemes a good idea?

Maybe. What is a good idea is thinking long and hard about how to foster staff commitment. In part this must be done through day-to-day motivation, in part through longer term schemes to encourage retention (and a commitment to working while retained, of course!). Money talks. It may not be the only thing that motivates, indeed a current salary is rarely motivational in the way that a salary increase is. The latter links to recognition and achievement in the workplace: both of which are prime motivators. Money alone is certainly not guaranteed to transform any negative motivational feeling instantly.

Overall financial schemes can, however, be a significant factor in long term motivation. Routinely they need relating to the individual and to have a foreseeable outcome. So a profit sharing scheme, for instance, may work best for those who can truly influence profits, incentive payments linked to revenue for some (sales people, for example). Share schemes might have early impact: issued just ahead of a takeover say. But their major impact is to cement the relationship between key, and perhaps difficult to replace, staff (often senior, though they can be at any level) and the organisation.

If this is what you want to do then it is a route worth investigating. Bear in mind that no motivational scheme acts as a single panacea; effective motivation is always achieved through a mix of methods. Also note that employee share schemes take you into complex territory and consideration must be given to finance and tax (not least tax of the individual). You will wisely not proceed without professional accounting advice.

Note: it is sensible to think widely – and creatively - about such things. For example, I know of one person in a key administrative role who was retained successfully for a disproportionately long time by having their remuneration include a company car, which was a perk not normally available at such a level.

How can I make systems underpin efficiency?

Systems are a means to an end, and not an end in themselves. A good system makes actions certain, and processes quicker, more accurate or easier in some way. Or it should do. Systems should work, but it's people who must work the systems. If people are to embrace the use of a system with enthusiasm, then they must:

- Understand *why* the task it performs is necessary
- Be briefed (or trained) *how* to use it
- Be convinced it is well designed, easy for them to use as well as efficiently fulfilling its function.

If people feel systems are unnecessary, or are in a form that mimics sledgehammers cracking nuts, then this will dilute good motivation. Good systems not only make things run smoothly therefore, they make people easier to manage and more likely to do a good job.

Even at the most basic level it is wise to consider systems carefully. Ask: what needs to be done, what is the best way of doing it, is an embryo system well devised both for those who use it and the job it must do, would some consultation with staff verify its suitability or improve it, or is a trial period (linked to feedback and any necessary revision) sensible before it is cast in tablets of stone? Beyond that, you should ask when any system needs checking again in future; and set a date and put it in a suitable "prompt" system to remind you. This will prevent it failing to keep up with change, and such regular planned review will also prevent any unintentional neglect leading to the unwelcome task of a whole raft of systems needing updating at the same time.

In some areas systems are complex, but once adopted they can take care of substantial areas of work, making much of it automatic and ensuring that the right things are done with real precision. Computer systems need especial care. Too easily computer systems can end up as a straightjacket, preventing the truly desired results from being properly or easily achieved because something can only be done in a certain way, exceptions are impossible, and the system was somewhat ill-judged in the first place.

Note: as a simple example consider standard (or form) letters. They save time and can systematise many tasks, but nothing does an organisation as much harm as one that has been neglected and got seriously out of date so that customers, say, notice it is just wrong.

Systems can rarely do the whole job. People are always important, and good people working well and using appropriate and efficient systems make a real difference.

How can I make individuals look beyond the next five minutes?

This is a question that links to planning. Plan the work and work the plan as it is said. Any organisation needs a plan (so too do departments and individuals). It is the oldest business maxim of them all – *If you don't know where you are going, any road will do*. And it is none the less true for being familiar.

The best plans are “Top down, bottom up”: that means that plans are not laid on others by one, or just a few people, “issuing the plan” after brief contemplation in secret. Rather that people up and down the organisation hierarchy are widely consulted and involved. And this is the best overall answer to this question: you must involve and consult people if you want them to develop the right attitude to planning anything. Managers may be paid to worry about the financial year, but realistically you will have some staff for whom Friday week seems long-term. What about them?

For more junior people the trick is to amortise. The big picture in terms of timescale, tasks and amounts of money may seem beyond their ken, but spelling out the implications can make matters clear. Tell them what plans mean for departments, for individuals and what must be done month-by-month or day-by-day to achieve them. Ask staff how they think targets can be achieved and what ideas they have for achieving them. Managers are not paid to have all the ideas necessary to make things run well. They do, however, need to make sure that there are *enough* ideas – and the team is very often the best source of them and should be encouraged to regularly contribute new thoughts on various aspects of the operation.

People who are well managed, who are involved in the business and aware of a clear – and well-communicated – plan, which is explained and with which they agree, will always work better and achieve more, especially if they have had some real involvement in the planning process.

Everyone needs a reason to see the big picture and it is easy to focus in too close. As a manager you need to see the broad picture yourself, and then help others to do likewise.

5 PROMPTING AND USING TEAM CREATIVITY

*Of course, we don't know what we are doing. If we knew
what we were doing, it would not be research.*

– Albert Einstein

Although this is the final chapter it addresses one of the most important matters management must address: idea generation. It is a simple little word – ideas – but it encompasses a great deal. New things and ways of doing things are needed on an ongoing basis in many areas, including:

- Products and services
- Administration
- The management and motivation of staff
- Marketing, particularly the promotional aspect of it
- Production
- Finance (across the span of both costs and pricing).

This is a list you could doubtless expand and also personalise (what sort of ideas are needed in your job or your part of the organisation?). Sometimes ideas are major, radical and can change a great deal, affecting the overall strategy of an organisation, for instance. But little ideas are useful too and one thing often leads to another.

Consider: Whoever thought of the simple premise of putting wheels on suitcases changed the face of travel (and why did so many ideas like that, which seem so obvious with hindsight, not occur earlier? It shows the possibilities.). An idea may be as simple as just a word or two yet still have huge impact. Who does not recognise phrases like: Beans Meanz Heinz, Snap! Crackle! Pop!, Finger Lickin' Good; some even go into the language like: *It does what it says on the tin*. Something some people refer to as “just a slogan” may create millions of sales. Ideas keep the organisation working in so many ways.

One maxim should be born in mind here: *good ideas do not care who has them*. A manager is not employed to have all the good ideas necessary to run the organisation or section of it, but they are paid to make sure there are sufficient of them. And individual members of the team can, and very much should, contribute. Prompting this process is a vital part of management.

The foundation of idea generation

Like so much else in the workplace ideas don't usually just pop up ready made, certainly not every day. Even when they seem to do so their arrival may be caused by other matters (more of this anon). Real inspirational moments are rare, though as one wag said: Thomas Edison once had a great idea, noticed the light bulb appear above his head and decided that was a much better idea!

But what really creates the circumstances for idea generation? I would mention four things that are certainly key:

- *Time*: creative people recognise that idea generation doesn't just happen and put some time into it, sometimes quite a lot of time (we look at some of the things this can be deployed against later). Doing this may require some real discipline and – a warning here – is most difficult to do at any time of pressure. When everyone is busy, the budget is insufficient and competition are pressing the focus tends naturally to go on the immediate rather than perhaps academic sounding “ideas sessions”. Yet both are important and current distractions leading to a lack of ideas can be disastrous.



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- *Doing the right things:* while there is no magic formula, no one thing that can be easily done to guarantee a flow of good ideas, there are numbers of proven approaches that make idea generation more likely (and, as has been said, they need some time). It's an active process and things need to be done to prime and prompt it.
- *The right attitude:* if you start by saying someone is “not an ideas person” then nothing much will change that. Idea generation is a process where results – good and useful ideas – can motivate you towards more of the same.
- *An ideas-positive culture:* some organisations seem to accept the need for all this more readily than others. They make the time for it and make it happen with a greater degree of certainty and success than others. They work at it, though it must be said that such attitudes tend to come from the top; *then involve everyone*.

The first prerequisite is clear objectives. Let us be specific: Objectives are not about what you decide to do, they are about what you, or an organisation, wish to achieve. Put simply, the task is not to spark ideas, say, “about the new policy”. Rather it is to seek novel yet practical solutions perhaps to an identified problem (maybe a current system taking too long). This in turn is designed to ensure that processes are speeded up and thus that costs are lowered or customer satisfaction increased. With this clearly in mind generating ideas is already likely to be easier and the focus produced by clear objectives rules out inappropriate directions for thought and discussion.

Creating opportunity for ideas to flow

So how do you encourage this process in your team? Sometimes someone gets a real light bulb moment – one that has them uttering “Ah-ha”. It may be that you have an idea: one complete, ready formed and ripe for implementation. Or, almost as useful, you can suddenly see your way to something and the rest of the thinking process becomes straightforward; which reminds me of the useful saying about scientific discovery – that it is heralded not by the cliché cry of “Eureka!” but by someone noticing something and saying “That’s funny.” They suddenly know they are on the right track. All of us probably experience this and in such circumstances may also wonder where on Earth that came from.

Note: just asking *why* things are done the way they are is a proven technique (much used in consultancy) to unearth ideas and opportunities.

Can you encourage these ah-ha moments? Having more would be good. And the science says yes you can. They seem, we are told, to occur through the way the subconscious and conscious mind works in relationship to each other. Sometimes (often?) given, let’s say, a problem, you worry away at it for a while and get nowhere. You leave it (perhaps in despair)

and yet when you turn to it again the following morning you find you have the solution. Scientists suggest that unknown to us consideration has continued in some way unconsciously, and that when our conscious thought is applied again it completes the process.

So the old expedient of “sleeping on” something (or at least putting it aside and taking a break from it) is genuinely something to actively use.

Similarly mulling something over while doing something else (something unrelated) is said to help the idea generation process. The something else needs to be well chosen. I read something about this in *New Scientist magazine* and an example given was mowing a lawn: it needs some thought (you don’t want to cut your foot off) but not so much thought that your mind can’t roam free and consider a good deal more. So deciding on something to ponder as you get the mower out or whatever may be very sensible. It seems that a pleasant environment is also conducive to thoughts that generate ideas, examples include mountain scenery, beaches and the like, but I somehow think this is unlikely to persuade the CEO towards a major office redesign. Research in this area does seem to justify to a degree the fun-oriented facilities favoured by some companies, especially the IT giants. Again these facts can be actively used.

One example of this sort of thing working well was used in a consulting firm. Every couple of weeks, management provided a regular free sandwich lunch in a meeting room. Staff spent much time out of the office with clients so varying combinations of people signed up for this in the morning of the scheduled days (the right number of sandwiches had to be sourced). In return for a free lunch the rule was that people could only talk shop and a topic was designated each time for discussion. People found it interesting – fun even – and it worked well, creating an ongoing number of useful ideas that improved the operation of the firm.

Using feedback

In the way that rain drops form around dust in the atmosphere, ideas may need a trigger or starting point. These may come from outside of the individual. One source of such prompts is feedback of which there may be a good deal about, either on a one-off basis or as a regular thing. For example:

- *Customer feedback*: this may be volunteered or requested and the requesting can happen in numbers of ways. Such include: information on product packaging, individual conversations and formal research. Ultimately customers pay the bills so they are always worth listening to; sometimes an idea may come up from this that is “ready to use”, alternatively (and also useful) an initial comment may prompt your thinking and lead on somewhere useful.

- *Activity specific feedback:* by this I mean such things as reactions to your making a presentation. Whilst criticism may be unwelcome in some senses, comments made can be true and offer practical advice which you can simply adopt or use as food for thought enabling you to produce ideas that lead to improvements. All that is necessary here is to set it up and ask for feedback.
- *Ready-made ideas:* there are some sources of ideas ready to be picked and used or perhaps used after some adaptation. Perhaps here I may mention my book “100 Great Sales Ideas” (Marshall Cavendish) as an example. This, and other titles in the series on different topics, offer ideas, based on the proven experience of others and presented in a form designed to help others. Such may come from a number of sources from magazines to websites, so it is worth keeping an eye open.
- *Specialist advice:* another source of ideas may be people around the organisation (or indeed outside it – creating a good network of potential sources of ideas is itself a good idea). Someone like a Training Manager or someone with more specialist knowledge and experience of a technical area (say IT), may be happy to spend a few minutes with you and such a conversation can spark ideas.

Note: given that formal and informal dialogue – and networking - between different members of staff can be useful as a source of ideas, management should keep an eye on the increasing tendency towards less and less personal interaction. Sending an email to people working a few steps away from each other is much less likely to lead to creativity than an actual conversation.

Next let's take an example of how time can be focussed on idea generation just in the ongoing round of work activities.

Prompting idea generation in staff

For any manager thinking generally of time management skills this may be useful in that respect. But it is a creative thinking prompter too. Consider: there is a scene that is played out in offices all over the world and which must waste untold hours every single day. Imagine a manager is busy at their desk when a head comes round the door and a member of staff comes in. “What is it?” they ask. And the reply is something like: “I'm not sure how to handle so and so and wondered if you would just check it with me”. The manager thinks for a second – they are busy, in the middle of a job and not wanting to lose concentration – but the interruption has already occurred. Typically their first thought is to minimise the interruption and get back to work fast. So, if the matter allows, they spend a minute or two explaining, as succinctly as possible, what to do and then tell the other person to let them get on and the brief impromptu meeting is over. This may be done kindly or abruptly, the effect is much the same, and the scene may be played out repeatedly for an individual manager.

But suppose the same manager is away from the office for a couple of days. While they are away people will face similar situations. If the manager was there they would go and ask. Because that's not possible, they simply get on with the job, they think, they make a decision, they take action, and life goes on. When the manager returns to the office what do they find? A chain of disasters? A plethora of wrong decisions and misjudged actions? Rarely is this the case. The things that might have been checked have been done, and not only is no harm done, everything has probably gone perfectly well.

Think about it. I suspect this picture will ring bells with many, if not most, managers. Why does it happen? It is a classic case of thinking that it is quicker to do things for people, most often in this case providing the answer or the decision, rather than to take any other action. I believe this is wrong. It's a lost opportunity.

You have to take a longer term view, and this is where the most time saving phrase in the language comes in. Next time you are interrupted in the way I have described, try responding by saying: *What do you think you should do?* They may not know, but you can press the point, prompt them to make some suggestions, and when they do, then ask which solution they think is best. This takes a few minutes of talking things through, certainly it takes longer than the response described earlier, but if they are coping when you are not there to ask, then you will find that when you prompt them they most often come up with a good answer or idea (there is often no one right way). At that point you can say something like: "That's fine", and away they go to carry on, leaving you to get back to your own work.

Now this is not just a better way of dealing with this situation from a time management point of view – indeed at this stage you may say it is worse as it prolongs the interruption. But it is also doing something else of very real value: it is teaching people not to interrupt, but rather to have the confidence to think matters through unaided. You have to be insistent about this. It will not work if you only make people think it through when you have more time, and still provide a quick answer when you are busy. Every time – every single time – someone comes through the door with a question about something with which you believe they should be able to deal unaided, you say: "What do you think you should do?" It must become a catch phrase. And as this practice continues the message will get home to people, so that if they even start to think of asking you they can hear your likely response in their mind. You will find such questions coming less and less often. You will find that, if they do ask, people move straight to the second stage, and come in with two or three thought out options just wanting you to say which is best. Resist. Ask *them*. The message will stick and, surprise, surprise, you will find you are saving time. What is more, your people will almost certainly get to like it more also, especially if you comment favourably on how well they are doing on the decisions they are making unaided. You make people think, think effectively and there is no reason why you cannot give an emphasis on thinking creatively. This is a key way of not only prompting ideas, but creating the habit of this sort of thinking.

All this process needs is some persistence and determination. Early on you may think it is taking too much time, but the investment formula will surely pay off. There are considerable amounts of time to be saved here, linked in fact to the number of people who report to you. Do not be faint hearted about this, it is very easy to break your resolve in a busy moment and send someone on their way with an instant dictated solution. Exceptions to your consistency will just make the lesson take longer to get over. But this idea really does work in the longer term; not to operate this way does your people a disservice and allows you to miss out on something that produces so many advantages.

Furthermore there is a learning process involved here. A manager can prompt people to think for themselves and (mostly) they find they can. On those issues where ideas are necessary you focus attention and thinking on that and may be surprised at the ideas that begin to come out. Of course, the thinking process can link to other matters mentioned here, for instance someone so prompted may go away and chat something over with a colleague and an idea may come from that. However it happens the process is immensely constructive and creative; it actually acts to set time aside for creative thinking and, what is more so doing can become a habit.

This example links use of time to the thought that much of what can be done in idea generation is not a solo activity. As a manager you supervise a valuable, and too often hidden, resource – your team's creativity. This chapter has given a flavour of what is possible, the moral is to explore and use it. Doing so can achieve much. Good idea?

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6 AFTERWORD

It is what you learn after you know it all that counts.

– John Wooden

Management is assuredly a complex business, but there are certain aspects of it that contribute disproportionately to its being successful. Here, in this brief text, the concentration has been on common questions asked about making a team successful and on encapsulating the essential action and attitudes that provide the answers to them. It certainly does not claim to present the whole picture, though what it does present is certainly intended to be practical and useful (and perhaps prompt further investigation).

Management, and certainly the stage it is enacted upon also, are both dynamic. The search for excellence is not therefore one of adopting the “right” solution and then deploying it slavishly forever more. Rather success comes through seeing things in the right way and always searching for the best way of dealing with matters on an individual basis.

Good, effective management is always what works, what suits today’s conditions and today’s people – your people; it is not what the more obtuse theories say it should be. Getting it right matters. And doing it right makes a difference – a real difference – to results. Any manager stands or fall not least on the success of their people; manage them well and they will help you succeed. To achieve this, the most important things to take on board are perhaps simply the resolution to manage thoroughly and well, and the understanding that managing people effectively does not happen unaided - but that you must work continuously and actively committing time to make it happen.

There is, regrettably, no one single magic formula, no one thing that can be simply done and creates an excellent team overnight. Success is achieved by a series of ongoing inputs, effectively executed and monitored and reinforced. The story that follows is told in various guises, but the main point remains the same: it is a complex version of the old proverb that you should “*look after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves*”.

In ancient Persia a courtier of the king invented the game of chess. The king was so taken with this and offered them any prize they cared to name as a reward. The courtier asked for a grain of wheat for the first square of the chess board, two for the second, and four grains for the third and so on – doubling each time. The courtier was clearly numerate. After ten doublings the total number of grains is over 1000, after doubling for each of the 64 squares on a chessboard this exponential growth produced more grain than had been produced in the history of the world, a number in the quadrillions with eighteen noughts after it.

The moral is simple: things mount up. The inputs you make as a manager mount up. Some things may seem insignificant, certainly individually, but together can create the team you want. For example, if you are too busy to say “Well done” it may seem not to matter too much, but good motivation does matter, and does make a difference, and it is the individual things done that achieve the end result. You can usefully apply this principle widely against the management task.

One final question:

Are good managers born or made?

Of course, some individuals have inherent characteristics in place that help them be a good manager. Some undergo training, for example being sent on a management course before being promoted into a position in which they must manage a team.

But perhaps the best way to answer this question is to say that good managers are always, to a degree, self-taught. Management is, after all, a practical process, perhaps one also that is as much art as science. In my experience the best managers are those that think about the process, they take note of what they do and how it works (or not) and learn – and adjust – from experience; they also take steps to investigate the techniques and skills that make it work (if you are reading this then you are already doing just that). Your being, or becoming, a good manager is largely down to you.

Striving for excellence may not guarantee success, but it does make it much more likely. Finally, one captain of industry, Bob Scholey, commented about management:

“There is no magic to management. I make sure people know what they are doing and then see that they do it”.

Sounds like advice we would all do well to follow.

Note: by its very nature this title comments on a wide span of activities. As was said at the start, while it identifies priorities and offers some how-to advice along the way, it cannot and does not provide chapter and verse on everything mentioned. It may well be useful to end your reading by asking if doing so has flagged any areas which you should investigate and review in more detail.