

Title:

Management Training - Myth, Magic or Mayhem?

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Summary:

What's the most successful way to learn about being a good manager? Bob Selden of the National Learning Institute suggests some tips for all aspiring managers and a few pitfalls to avoid in their quest to become better managers.

Keywords:

Management training, learning, management learning, learning styles, 360 degree feedback

Article Body:

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Training courses! The most recent had been termed "Management for Senior Officers" and had been a minor disaster - all psychology and how to be nice to junior officers. How to involve them, how to motivate them, how to relate to them. Rebus had returned to his station and tried it for one day, a day of involving, of motivating, of relating. At the end of the day, a Detective Constable had slapped a hand on Rebus' back, smiling.

"Bloody hard work today, John. But I've enjoyed it."

"Take your hand off my f...ng back." Rebus had snarled. "And don't call me John."

The DC's mouth fell open. "But you said ... " he began, but didn't bother finishing. The brief holiday was over. Rebus had tried being a manager. Tried it and loathed it.

If you are like Ian Rankin's Inspector John Rebus ("Tooth and Nail", by Ian Rankin, St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1996, New York) who finds learning to be a manager difficult and in fact loathes being a manager, or you love being a manager, or you merely languish in being a manager, but in any of these cases still find learning how to manage difficult, then there's some good news! Our difficulty with learning how to be a manager is probably not to do with "management" per se, but the way the learning is presented to us and the

different ways in which we all like to learn. (Mind you, managing - being responsible for the performance of others - is probably the second most challenging task one can undertake, if you'll agree with me that "parenting" is probably the most challenging.)

If you'd like to make learning to be a manager a little easier, then read on.

Each of us learns in a different way and at a different pace, but researchers have found that in general terms, we have a preference for learning through seeing, learning through listening, or learning through moving, doing and touching. To make it easy for us, Peter Honey and Alan Mumford have identified four main learning style preferences -

- Activists, who like to be involved in new experiences. They are open minded and enthusiastic about new ideas but get bored with implementation. They enjoy doing things and tend to act first and consider the implications afterwards. They like working with others but tend to hog the limelight.
- Reflectors, who like to stand back and look at a situation from different perspectives. They like to collect data and think about it carefully before coming to any conclusions. They enjoy observing others and will listen to others' views before offering their own.
- Theorists, who adapt and integrate observations into complex and logically sound theories. They think problems through in a step by step way. They tend to be perfectionists who like to fit things into a rational scheme. They tend to be detached and analytical rather than subjective or emotive in their thinking.
- Pragmatists, who are keen to try things out. They want concepts that can be applied to their job. They tend to be impatient with lengthy discussions and are practical and down to earth.

Which is your preferred style of learning? Read the descriptions over again, then make a mental note of the description that best suits the way you prefer to learn. You may find, that there are two styles that you can relate to - that's ok, you can take a bit of both (in my own case for instance, I prefer the pragmatic approach, but at times I also need to reflect to learn best).

Following are some tips on how to learn best about being a manager, depending on your style.

Activists:

- Talk with your colleagues about how they have managed difficult situations -

invite them to lunch for a discussion!

- Get involved in project teams - particularly at the start of the project. Volunteer for the brainstorming or idea generation segments, but not for implementation issues or activities. It's a good idea to take on the Chair's role so that you can direct others!
- Visit other organisations to see how they do things (short visits only)
- Take part in business games • If someone gives you a management book to read or suggests you read a particular book, get someone else to précis it for you and tell you about the "good parts". If it includes activities, go straight to these.
- Avoid conferences or training courses where you know there will be a lot of theory presentations. If you have to attend, make sure you ask a lot of questions to keep yourself from being bored. Try taking a lot of notes or drawing pictures during the "boring" presentation parts and think about how the issues being raised could be used back at work.

Reflectors:

- Take the time to watch people as they work - particularly in groups and how they respond to one another.
- When you have just been through a difficult experience, take some time off (an hour or two) to think about it. Write down what went right, what went wrong and what you would do differently next time.
- Keep a log of the management activities you undertake over a one week period. Classify these activities under "Leading" (setting the direction, giving the big picture to your people) "Managing" (setting performance objectives for people, following up on performance issues, and implementing development initiatives for your team) and "Operating" (doing the administrative tasks such as budgeting, reporting). At the end of the week, spend a couple of hours reviewing your log and decide where you need to change your emphasis to improve your management.
- At least once a year, take a day or so off work and spend your time reflecting on what has gone and what you need to do over the coming 12 months to improve. Try to split your reflection time between 20% reflecting on the past and 80% focusing on what you are going to do in the coming 12 months.

Theorists:

- Undertake training courses and activities that are highly structured. You will need to make sure that the training is based on sound logic and reasoning and contains interesting concepts.
- Because you are less likely to attend courses of an "emotive" or "feeling" nature, go out of your way to do so, keeping in mind the above point so that it won't be too painful for you!
- Seek out colleagues who have a similar learning style to yours. Arrange to meet with them regularly. Make sure that the meetings are well structured, have clear aims and are based around a particular management challenge, concept or theory. If there is an article or book on the topic, ensure that both of you have read it first.
- Look for management development articles (The Harvard Business Review is an excellent source). Send a copy of an article to colleagues who think similarly to yourself - ask them to read it and attach three or four questions that you think are relevant to your workplace. Ask for their feedback. If you really want to get into a management topic in depth, the publication "Organizational Dynamics" is very good.
- Seek out interesting projects where the issues are complex.
- Set yourself up as an "expert" in a particular field of your work and encourage others to ask for your advice. Be careful to see how the issue they raise relates to how you might also improve your own management style.

Pragmatists:

- Find another manager whom you respect and who is recognised as a good manager. Take a particular management challenge or issue to him/her and ask them how they would handle it.
- Look for training courses that have a particular relevance to your industry and job. Make sure they include plenty of feedback (such as 360 degree profiles, role plays and active coaching from the trainer).
- Look for "management techniques" - e.g. principles, concepts, techniques that will save you time.
- Look for management models. Ask some of your colleagues (such as the Theorists) to show you how the "best management concepts they know" work in

practise.

- Avoid theory type training sessions, meetings and books. If you buy a management book, make sure it has very short chapters (one page is ideal!) with lots of "How to". You will probably enjoy books such as The One Minute Manager.
- Look for training videos that show you "How to", but do not dwell on theory.
- Get a trusted colleague to sit in on some of your management meetings and give you some feedback on their effectiveness. Make sure to ask him/her how they would run them if they were you.

Does management training have to be painful? My own belief is that the old saying of "no pain, no gain" should not apply to learning about how to be a better manager. Management training should be interesting, fun and exciting and it can only be that way for you if it is designed to suit your particular learning style.

I hope that some of the above tips on learning about management have been useful - mix and match to suit your own preferred style of learning. I would hate to think that we might all end up like John Rebus, loathing being a manager simply because we do not have the right opportunities to learn!

I'm always interested to hear your stories about managing, so if you have any, please drop me a line via www.nationallearning.com.au or if you would like some more information about any of the above or perhaps some free tips or advice, you can contact me or get these at www.nationallearninginstitute.com

Good luck with learning to be a manager.