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MANAGEMENT MATTERS

FROM THE
HUMDRUM TO
THE BIG
DECISIONS



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LUKE JOHNSON, *FT* COLUMNIST AND ENTREPRENEUR

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Management Matters

The next task is to establish the work of a team. In some cases an output may have already been determined, in others it may be more vague. The manager must then decide to what extent he wishes to involve the team in laying out a plan to achieve its goal. In a team where each member has highly specialised skills, the manager's primary role will be that of integrator, deferring to each expert, but enabling these varied talents to work effectively together. In a team where skills and confidence are low, the manager may need to be more directive, laying out a clear path to victory, hoping that over time his team members will be able to participate more and more in finding solutions and success.

It is fashionable to talk of the need to secure employee 'buy-in' to management, but there is no off-the-rack solution to securing this. Where employees are seasoned and expert, they will expect to be heard and involved in any decision making. Where they are naive and new to the work, they may prefer to be given clear direction.

The very word 'team' is not as generic as we might like. Even within sports, we see very different models.⁷ When a country sends its 'team' to the Olympics, it is sending a group of people who excel in their individual disciplines but whose interaction is extremely limited. At the end of the games, their achievements may be measured collectively in the number of medals their nation has won, but a gymnast has nothing to do with a pentathlete, or a sailor with a sprinter. Each nation's Olympic committee may have worked for years to create the structures and provide the support which enables these athletes to succeed. But each individual athlete trains, improves and succeeds according to his own talents and efforts. They can afford to be hugely selfish in how they go about achieving their goals.

Compare this with a soccer team, where each player has highly developed specialist skills related to the position they play. The

⁷ 'There's More than One Kind of Team', Peter Drucker, *Wall Street Journal*, 11 February 1992

goalkeeper has fast reflexes to block shots, the striker is fast and opportunistic, while the defender may be much more strategic and physical in how he plays. They may all have basic levels of athleticism, but their talents have evolved in very different ways. As you watch them play, their individual gifts are on display, but so too is their ability to play in a team, which is all that is measured in the eventual score. A selfish but talented player will quickly lose the trust of his team-mates, while a shrinking violet may lack the resolve to take control of a failing situation. Soccer requires talented individuals who know how to blend their individual, specific talents into the work of a team.

A third model, and one which is most coveted these days, is that of the tennis doubles team. This is a self-managed team in which each player is interchangeable and capable of filling in and doing the work of the other. You cannot deflect responsibility by passing the ball to a team-mate. If it comes whizzing at you, you are expected to play your shot. In a traditional hierarchical model, it was much easier to defer, to slink away from responsibility. In this tennis doubles model, each team member is much more exposed. For those willing and able to commit, trust and collaborate, this can be enormously empowering and exciting. For those less confident about their work or unconvinced by the benefits of such teamwork, it can seem frightening and unfair.

When selecting a team, a manager must seek to achieve a balance between collaboration and conflict. If all he wants is a team that gets along, then he might select people who are very like each other

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and who communicate easily. But if he wants a team which finds novel, creative solutions to problems, he must accept different personalities, perspectives and talents. He must accept the inevitability of misunderstandings and disputes as his team works towards its goal. But

some degree of conflict is the price of doing difficult and ultimately

meaningful work. If all you do is glide along well-oiled and familiar tracks, competitors will soon overtake you. Set up too much conflict within a team, however, and you may find it equally ineffective.

The manager must weigh up the importance of adding product, market or functional expertise to a team, with the personalities that expertise comes with. If a team relies heavily on friendship and trust to work well, then an untrustworthy, unlikeable addition, however talented, could be toxic. Similarly, if the relationships within the team are more professional than personal, more clinical and objective, then personality may be much less relevant.

The ultimate measurements of the team's success, however, will be whether it achieves what it sets out to do, and whether its members learn from or desire to repeat the experience. If a team meets its target, but its members find no measure of fulfilment in the process, then its manager will have failed as surely as if he made everyone happy but failed to produce the desired output.

In an ideal situation, influence in a team is accorded in line with expertise. If you are the team member with deep knowledge of finance, you are listened to when it comes to financial issues. The same with design or marketing. The experts hold sway in their respective fields. But rarely does this pan out. Influence tends to follow more random paths. Some people wield it by dint of their personalities or their experience. Some people may talk a lot, while others may have powerful relationships with senior managers beyond the team. It is up to the manager to recognise and moderate these various forms of influence in order to establish the process and habits of the team. The greatest poison in any team is a sense of unfairness. If anyone feels ignored, or unfairly treated, it will quickly lead to resentment which leads to poor performance.

So it is vital that a manager establishes the right habits early and reinforces them often. He can only do this after taking note of the personalities and talents of the team. No manager can enforce 'norms' on a team, but he can introduce processes and discipline

which stimulate or limit certain behaviours. If team members are new to each other, for example, frequent and well-directed meetings may be helpful. If they have well-established and successful working habits, then the new manager may be best standing back. If an individual team member appears to be holding back, then it is the manager's job to pull them into discussions. Some teams may respond well to organised team-building exercises, others may never forgive you for them. A well-run team will have mechanisms in place for analysing its own performance and self-correcting, but if it doesn't, a manager must introduce a way to provide constructive and collaborative feedback. Feedback which is clumsily delivered, in a way that shows a lack of awareness of the team's work and challenges, or personal insensitivity, can be even more destructive than no feedback at all. But again, the most important thing is to act early and often. Habits, once entrenched, become very hard to change.

When attempting to improve a team's process, the manager must be very clear about where any problems lie. Is it a question of lack of effort? Or lack of skill? A problem with the strategic approach? Or does the problem lie outside the team, with the larger organisation, or even the market? Extreme clarity around these issues will allow the manager to be properly understood and the team to make the correct adjustments. The more specific you can be about a problem and how it might be addressed, the more willing you will find team members to participate in a process of constant improvement. Blanket criticism is a sure way to seed destructive resentments.

There are essentially four sets of clashing forces inherent to managing teams:

- *The individual versus the team.* Not everyone wants to be part of a team, and not all talents are easily subsumed into a team effort. And yet, no individual is capable of all a team can achieve. There are inefficiencies to teamwork. An individual does not have to hold meetings with himself, give himself progress updates or politic against himself. But with these

inefficiencies can come enormous advantages of shared knowledge and effort.

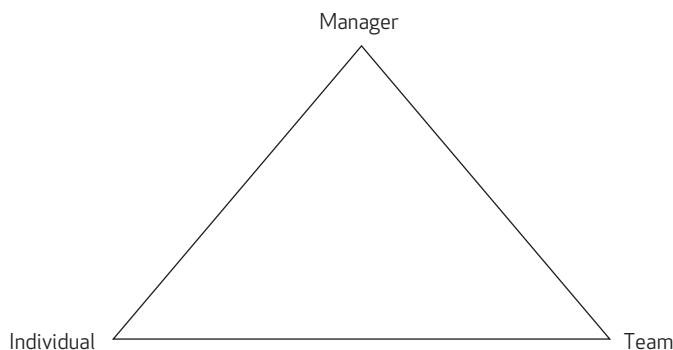
- *Collaboration versus confrontation.* Conflict is uncomfortable, but it is also inevitable when new ideas are being shaped, formed and implemented. You want your team to get along, but you also want them challenged and goaded, to be exposed to new ideas and realities and pressured to perform to a higher level. How do you balance team harmony with the clash of ideas vital to progress?
- *Performance versus development.* The relentless demands of performance often leave no time to reflect, learn and improve. But it is vital to step off the hamster wheel now and again and invest time and effort in learning and improving. It is similar to a racing driver coming into the pits, to change tyres and refuel, briefly losing time against his rivals but knowing that he will ultimately be rewarded as he comes out faster than before. By giving a team time to learn and develop, a manager is also enabling the sense of personal fulfilment in a way that performance alone cannot.
- *Managerial authority versus team autonomy.* Any manager wants his team to feel empowered and happy and to collaborate without constant monitoring. But there will inevitably be goals and deadlines to be met, and teams will often look to managers to set in place the habits and processes which will lead to the achievement of these goals in a way that is satisfying to each team member. The manager must be both a team player and apart from the team, retaining enough of his own authority and influence to manage and lead when issues arise inside and outside the team.

Based on these inevitable clashes, a popular way to think about managing teams is through a triangle of relationships.⁸

⁸ *Managing in the New Team Environment: Skills, Tools, and Methods*, Larry Hirschhorn, iUniverse, 1991

If a manager pays too much attention to individuals, they may tend to think they have special relationships with the manager, and this creates conflicts of authority and mistrust. The manager quickly loses faith in the notion of the group ever working together as a team. Similarly, if the manager pays too much attention to the team, individuals may feel neglected and pull back. This can engender passivity and a similar collapse in the manager's authority and hopes.

It is useful, then, to imagine managing teams as a dynamic process in which you never wish to be too close to any point on the triangle, but constantly on the move adjusting your levels of attention and direct influence to maximise the talents, the sense of involvement and the willingness to work hard and collaborate which will eventually determine your team's success.



Source: Hirschhorn, Larry, *Managing in the New Team Environment: Skills, Tools, and Methods*
San Jose, CA: Authors Choice Press © 2002. Reprinted with permission.

Managing clever people

Every successful CEO will tell you that it is vital to surround yourself with people cleverer than yourself. They will fill in the gaps in your own talents as well as come up with great ideas and give you useful feedback. But this comes with its own challenges.