Be A Better Manager

My basic premise for today is the most managers don't manage very well, and here's why: They manage from the top, rather than from the front and from the beginning. I think this stems from a commonly-accepted definition of management, which most managers seem to think is about being in charge. Personally, I think management is more about being an enabler than being a boss. It starts with a clear understanding of goals and objectives. And it works best when managers don't manage people, but instead create teams.

Management By Objective

I read once that *management is the process of setting and achieving organizational objectives*. Peter Drucker introduced the concept of Management By Objective in the 1950's. In essence, MBO is about participative goal setting. In the "big company" model, the top manager has a vision. He or she consults with the senior management team to refine that vision, and to formalize the objective. Each senior manager then repeats the process with his or her direct reports, and the process continues from level to subordinate level, until, ideally, every employee knows his or her role and has measurable standards to meet. And, because every employee theoretically participated in the process, no one fights the plan, which increases the likelihood of success.

In the "small company" model, the whole process is compressed, with far fewer levels, but it's basically the same process. Step 1 is the vision: *Where do we want to go?* Step 2 is the plan: *How do we get there from here?* Step 3 is the measurement: *Are we following the roadmap? Are we making good time?* Step 4 may be some adjustment: *Should we modify the plan and/or the timeline? Do we need to slow down? Speed up? Add resources?*

Two things are important here. The first is that this all starts at the beginning, with the vision, then the objective, then the plan. The second is that it's all about *we.* If you've ever played sports — or watched sports, or read about sports — you probably know the expression "there's no *I* in *team.*" It's been my experience that the best managers tend to be *we* people rather than *I* people.

They also tend to be pullers rather than pushers. Think about that for a moment, and think about the expression *follow the leader*. I'll grant you that some pushing may be necessary sometimes, but the real essence of leadership is about pulling from the front, not pushing from behind.

Back to Management By Objective, it's a strategy that makes lots of sense, right? But MBO also has limitations. The most important limitation relates directly to the execution of the plan, and that takes us to a more fundamental definition of management: *Management is making sure that everything from the big things to the little things gets done and done right.*

Think about it. If that kind of management doesn't happen, the plan may fail. The objective may not be met. That's why great managers are micromanagers.

Micromanagement

Somewhere along the line, *micromanagement* became a bad word in business. I'm not sure there's a better word, though, for *managing the little things*. So with that in mind, I want to attempt a change in attitude via a change in language. *Micromanagement* is a good thing. *Overmanagement* is a bad thing. And *Time Management* fits into this discussion too, because some of the little things are too little to justify the time of a "big" manager.

Here's an example. One of my clients, the owner of a $12 million printing company, regularly sits in on hiring interviews, for even the least-skilled, back-of-the-shop positions. There are no shortage of big-picture matters that would represent a better use of his time, but he tends to put those on his back burner.

Compounding the problem, he often rejects candidates that the hiring managers believe to be fully qualified, and he occasionally pushes them to hire people they don't like. So he's *overmanaging* by sticking his nose into decisions his subordinate managers are capable of making, and he's not using his time effectively. I think you'll agree, that's bad management on both counts.

He has justified this behavior by telling me that his managers have made bad hires in the past. OK, but *overmanaging* is not the solution to that problem. I'd much rather see him *micromanage,* by teaching them how to hire more effectively. Training them, in other words. Once he does that, he should be able to delegate with greater confidence.

Delegating is the obvious solution to problem of some things being too little to justify the time of a "big" manager. But once we start talking about delegating, we have consider words like *authority, responsibility, accountability* and *capability*.

Let me put all four of those words into a series of sentences. You build a management team by giving people *authority*. By accepting that authority, they take on *responsibility* for certain elements of management. Responsibility is something someone feels; *accountability* is the enforcement of that feeling. And none of this is worth anything if the person with authority lacks the *capability* to do the job.

Management Team

When you delegate, you add to your *management team*, and a team is a classic example of a force multiplier — a whole that is greater than the sum of its individual parts. I mentioned Peter Drucker earlier, and here's something he wrote in a 1992 article in the Wall Street Journal: "'Team building' has become a buzzword in American business. The results are not overly impressive."

You might be surprised that I'm quoting Drucker here when what he said is so negative, but he went on to explain his perception of the problem, "the all-but-universal belief among executives that there is just one kind of team. There actually are three — each different in its structure, in the behavior it demands from its members, in its strengths, its vulnerabilities, its limitations, its requirements, but above all, in what it can do and should be used for."

The first kind of team, according to Drucker, is the baseball team, which he also compared to an assembly line team. The players play *on* the team; they do not play *as* a team. They have fixed positions they never leave.

The second kind of team is the football team, which he compared to a symphony orchestra. The players still have fixed positions, but they support each other and interact with each other to a far greater degree. The receiver runs a pass pattern, the left tackle protects the quarterback's blind side, the quarterback makes the throw, and the result is (hopefully) a completed pass. The horn section plays a sequence of notes, the string section plays another sequence of notes, the conductor manages the timing, and the result is (hopefully) music to our ears.

The third kind of team is the tennis doubles team, which Drucker compared to a jazz combo. Here, the players have a primary position rather than a fixed position. In doubles tennis, when one player serves, the other takes a position to cover a part of the court when the serve is returned, but once the play starts, both players must be able to react to the changing demands of the game. In jazz, the players are encouraged to take turns in a musical game of follow the leader — to keep up when it's their turn to follow, and to take the music to another level when it's their turn to lead.

Lessons To Learn

What can we take from all of this? First, let's understand that a baseball team is a limited model for a management team (with one caveat, that I'll get to in a moment.) Second, let's consider that a football team is as dependent on its coach as it is on its players. Someone has to draw the play. Someone has to call the play. Without the play — the plan! —a football team is a collection of mass and energy without direction, which is not a recipe for success.

Third, let's recognize that a tennis doubles team requires a level of collaboration that goes beyond running a play or playing a musical score. I think it's significant that doubles teammates usually refer to each other as *partner*. There's more to it than a shared commitment to winning, though, even baseball teams have that. Maybe I can explain it this way. There's an element of *anticipation* in great doubles play, knowing what your partner is likely to do, and moving into position to support that play before it actually happens. In management, it's more a matter of *understanding*, knowing what your teammate would want or need out of any given situation, and incorporating that knowledge into your response to the situation.

Here's an example. With another one of my clients, one of the printers broke down, threatening a delivery commitment. The Production Manager knew that he had three options. One, he could call for normal repair service, which would probably have the machine running again the next day, but would result in an unhappy customer. Two, he could call for rush service, which would probably have the machine running in time to avoid any consequences with the customer, but the rush repair charges would also eat most of the profit on that particular order. Three, he could outsource the printing, but that would eat all of the profit on the order, and then some.

He decided to call for normal service. Because he also knew two other things. One, the customer in question was a bad customer. (For what it's worth, I define a bad customer as *more trouble than they're worth.* This customer certainly was, contributing a fair amount of volume, but not a lot of profit, and causing lots of disruption with their often unreasonable demands.) Two, his company was in a dispute with the only trade printer he could have outsourced the order to. Sending them a rush order would have given them leverage in that dispute.

So, even though the decision to call for normal service would result in an unhappy customer, the "bigger-picture" considerations made it the right decision. The owner of the company was very pleased with the way his Production Manager handled — managed! — this situation. They worked well as a team, without a whole lot of visible teamwork. But it probably took a lot of work to build the team!

Your Team(s)

The bottom line on all of this is that you'll be a better, more effective manager if you manage by objective and lead your team(s) — and please note, that can be *teams* plural, and they can be different types of teams. It's also worth noting that you can be a member of some teams and the manager/leader of others.

The Production Manager I just mentioned is a perfect example. He's a member of a tennis-doubles-type team with his boss — not the leader, but definitely a partner. He does lead the production team, and part of the way he does that is by putting the production plan together every day — the "game plan" by which a wide range of projects move through the various parts of the production process. Another way he does that is by anticipating problems, and coaching his players on how to avoid them, and how to respond to them if they can't be avoided. He would tell you, I think, that his production team is mostly a football-type team, with some baseball-type team situations, and some tennis-doubles-type team opportunities. He would also tell you, I think, that the best way to manage is to make everyone a manager.

Here's what that means. The lowest ranking employee at the company is a young man who does bindery/ finishing work and makes deliveries. Sometimes the work involves machines, but more often it's handwork. He probably spends half of his other-than-delivery time collating and kitting, putting odd-sized documents and merchandising graphics together into packages.

He works under the direction and supervision of the Production Manager, but once he's given an assignment, he becomes directly responsible for managing something. He doesn't manage other people, but let's understand that *management* can involve any combination of people, projects, products and/or processes. The key point here is that if this young man is properly trained, he can manage a project or a process with a minimum of supervision. He can make sure that *everything from the big things to the little things* — within that project or process — *gets done and done right.* And by doing so, he can be a very valuable part of a management team.

In this case, it's a baseball-model team, and that takes us back to something I mentioned earlier — that a baseball team is a limited model for a management team, with one caveat. The caveat is that you want every player on a baseball team to be competent (at the very least) at his or her position. If any skills/competencies are lacking, you have only two options. One is to replace the player with someone who does have those skills/competencies. The only other is to "train them in" to the player you have — which I think means that someone has to micromanage that situation!

Final Thought

Here's a final thought for today. If it's true that most managers don't manage very well, that means the quality of your management is probably hurting your business.

I could be wrong about that. You could be a great manager, a dynamic leader, and a terrific team-builder, and your teams could be championship-caliber already. If you're not though — and if they're not — the shiny side of this coin is that you all have an opportunity to improve!