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Behind Closed Doors

Secrets of Great Management

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Introduction

Most of us have seen bad management at work, and you might learn what *not* to do by watching bad management. But to be a great manager, avoiding what not to do isn't good enough—great managers actively learn the craft of management.

It's worth learning how to be a great manager—both in human and in economic costs. The costs of bad management are enormous; we've been in numerous situations where we've seen the company fold because the managers couldn't manage their groups effectively.

Because managers amplify the work of others, the human costs of bad management can be even higher than the economic costs. We've seen people who were invaluable to the organization leave because they refused to work with poor managers—managers who depressed morale and productivity. We've talked to people who describe treatment that borders on abuse, meted out as “management.”

Learning to be a great manager by yourself isn't easy—even if you carefully observe great managers. One of the reasons good management is so hard to learn is that much of management takes place behind closed doors. Generally speaking, you can observe only the public behaviors of managers and how your managers interact with you.

But managers interact with people of all personalities, skill levels, and motivations. And since those interactions often take place in private one-on-one meetings and in conference rooms where managers work together, the work is invisible to the rest of the world and to people aspiring to management.

We're going to open those doors and allow you to see great management in action.

Instead of preaching rules of management and innundating you with bullet points and checklists, we're going to open those closed doors and show you firsthand how a great manager handles the normal, day-to-day challenges and crises that arise. Our great manager is Sam.

As we begin our story, Sam Morgan has just taken the new position of Director of Development in a high-tech organization. Sam is in his midforties and has been managing groups of technical people for more than ten years. He's pretty sure everyone wants to do a good job, but it seems they don't always know what to do or how to do it. His job is to make sure everyone in his department—including the managers—knows what they need to do and that they have the right tools to do their jobs. Four managers report to Sam.

Ginger O'Brien is in her late twenties. This is her first management job, heading up the User Interface (UI) department. She is ambitious, excited about her work, and sure that there's one right way to do anything—even if she doesn't know that way yet.

Kevin McCloud manages the Middleware department. He's in his early thirties. He's tired. He slogs through the days, trying to keep up with all the work. He's sure if he just works hard enough, he'll succeed.

Jason Stone manages the Backend group but has extra responsibilities toward the Operations group. He has been managing people and projects for five years. He feels responsible for the Operations people, because they were part of his group until just a few months ago.

Finally, Patty Larsen manages the Database group. She's filling in as an acting manager as a favor to the previous director. She's in her midtwenties, and she's frustrated with being a manager. She wants to return to working as a technical lead.

We'll follow Sam over the course of his first weeks on the job. Watch as Sam works with his managers to create an effective and productive department, despite the usual array of difficulties.

What do you think Sam will do first?

Week One

Learning about the People and the Work

Some people think management is all about the people, and some people think management is all about the tasks. But great management is about leading and developing people and managing tasks.

If you want to lead people, you need to know them: their unique strengths, aspirations, and patterns of behavior. If you want to manage work, you need to see what people are doing and understand how it fits into the context of the group's mission.

You need to learn three things when you enter a new organization or job:

- Who the people are—their strengths and interests—and what they are working on
- The stated mission of the group and how the group provides value
- How your group fits into the larger organization

It would be great to learn this information on your first day and in nice neat boxes. But it doesn't work that way; the information will emerge and coalesce as you uncover information and perform management work. Start with the people first in order to build trust and lay the foundation for a cohesive team. A good way to do this is to meet one-on-one with everyone who reports to you.



Monday Morning

Ginger, the UI manager, arrived for her first one-on-one with Sam, breathless and three minutes late.

“Come on in and sit down, Ginger,” Sam said.

“What’s this meeting for? Our old manager never did this,” Ginger said, as she flipped her red ponytail over her shoulder and plunked herself down in the chair. Crossing her arms, she leaned back.

“I like to meet with my direct reports every week.”

“Oh. What do you want me to say?” Ginger asked.

“For this week, I’d like to get to know you better. Tell me a little about yourself.” Sam opened his notebook and looked at Ginger, calm and alert.

Sam led the conversation to learn how Ginger worked and felt about her job. He used open-ended questions such as “How did you come to be in this job?” “What do you enjoy about your job?” and “What aspects are frustrating?” to tease out the information.

When Ginger declared she didn’t have enough people to keep up with Marketing’s “ever-changing demands,” Sam decided to probe for more information.

“Tell me more about the ever-changing Marketing demands you mentioned. What’s going on with that?”

As Sam asked more questions, he began to develop an understanding of how Ginger was working with the Marketing group—and how she wasn’t.

When Sam felt he had heard enough to grasp the situation, he switched to a topic he always covered when he started with a new group.

“Are there any personnel or pay issues for you or anyone in your group?”

Ginger shrugged. “No, I’m happy, and as far as I know, my staff is happy too.”

Sam and Ginger spent the rest of their half hour together talking about the projects Ginger’s group was working on.

As he brought the meeting to a close, Sam asked, “Is there anything I missed?” Ginger shook her head. “Okay, how does this time work for you to set up a regular weekly one-on-one meeting?”

“You mean we’re going to meet every week?”

“Yup. Every week,” said Sam.

“Okay, this is as good as any day,” Ginger acquiesced.

“Thanks for taking time to meet with me. If you think of anything else that I should know, or you have any question for me or about me, drop by.”

By the end of the day, Sam had met with all four managers. He learned that Ginger, the UI manager, had hair that matched her name and her temperament. Kevin, the Middleware manager, was a nice fellow—very technical—but Sam wasn’t sure how Kevin organized and prioritized the work for his group. Jason, the Backend manager, had his hands full with the Backend group supporting Operations as well as coaching his son’s hockey team.

Patty, the Database manager, was hard to read. She’d answered questions but hadn’t volunteered much.

Sam had seen a common theme emerge: everyone claimed he or she had too much to do and needed more staff.



Managing One Person at a Time

Properly done, one-on-ones build relationships. Managers who use one-on-one meetings consistently find them one of the most effective and productive uses of their management time.^[1] One-on-ones provide a venue for coaching, feedback, career development, and status reporting.

One-on-one meetings will help your staff know what you expect of them and that you value them enough to spend time with them.

Establish a standard weekly time. Meet with each person on your staff at the same time every week. A standing meeting creates its own rhythm and helps both parties remember to be prepared.

Remember your manners. Don’t take or make phone calls, return pages, or do other work during a one-on-one meeting. Allowing

interruptions sends the message that your staff member isn't worth even a half hour of your uninterrupted time.

Hold one-on-ones faithfully. Canceling one-on-ones sends the message that you don't value your staff member,^[6] and you will quickly lose touch with what's going on in the department. Persist with one-on-ones so you won't be surprised by late projects, unhappy employees, or festering problems.

Follow a consistent format for your one-on-ones. Consistency helps your staff know what to expect, how to prepare, and where to raise their issues.^[3] This doesn't mean you have to use the same format for every person and stick to the format in the face of unusual events. But maintaining consistency across time allows people to see you as solid and reliable, not capricious. See *Making One-on-Ones Work* on page 144 for a suggested structure for productive one-on-ones.

Be adaptable. Meeting consistently is useless if you aren't also adaptable in how you interact and respond to people. Adapt your management style to the *individual* and be fair in how you handle *situations*.^[2] Meet weekly with newer people or those who tend to veer off-track. Consider meeting every other week with people who plan their work, communicate proactively, and stay on-track.

That said, sometimes holding a weekly meeting sends the wrong message. If your group is responding to a crisis—one where the life of the organization is on the line—postpone one-on-ones for a short time. If crisis becomes a way of life, then return to regular one-on-ones. Regular one-on-ones help create a stable relationship between managers and team members, and help you learn about problems early. Learning about problems early leads to early solutions instead of crisis management.



Tuesday Morning

Sam started the day by making appointments to meet with his counterparts in other departments.

He called the Director of Marketing and left this message: "Sam Morgan here. I want to introduce myself. I started yesterday. I'm just learning the lay of the land. I'd like to set up a time to

You Can't Spend Too Much Time with People

After one of our management talks, a fellow approached us with a frown on his face. "You say I should meet with everyone weekly. Well, I have ten people on my staff, and if I met with every one of them every week, that would be five hours a week!" He was building up a head of steam. "That's almost a full day! If I spend all that time with people, I won't have time for my management work!"

Spending time with people *is* management work.

Budgets may count Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), but great teams count on *people*. People are not fungible producers or FTEs. Great managers know this and learn about the people in their groups—their strengths, weaknesses, desires, and pressures.

We're not suggesting sitting in someone's office all day every day, watching over their shoulders. That's annoying micromanagement at best, productivity-reducing interference at worst. And we aren't suggesting prying into people's private lives and discussing their private decisions.

We are suggesting holding one-on-ones every week to learn about the people who report to you. Learn where they're successful. Learn what they don't want to do. Learn where their aspirations lie. Show an interest in who they are as people.

Establish office hours—a specific time each day (or a few days each week) set aside for drop-in visits.

Talk to people. Interact when there's no "reason" to interact. One manager we know noticed that team members started stopping by her office more often when she started keeping a stash of chocolate on her desk. Another manager set up a gumball machine outside his door (which is rarely closed).

Show an interest in the people who report to you as people. When we talk to people who say they have a great manager, one of the first statements we hear is, "She (or he) cares about me as a person."