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Secrets of Great Management

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Week Six
Building Capability

Every time you meet one-on-one with the people on your staff, you have an *opportunity* to provide feedback and offer coaching. You have an obligation to provide feedback—it's information your employees need to be successful in their jobs. Coaching is a choice; sometimes yours, and sometimes the employee's.

Coaching provides the help and support for people to improve their capabilities. Employees can request coaching when they want to learn a new skill, when they want to improve their performance, or when they are stuck and need some fresh ideas. As a manager, you may initiate coaching when you see someone struggling or at risk of failure.

You always have the option not to coach. You can choose to give your team member feedback (information about the past), without providing advice on options for future behavior.

Monday Morning

From the first day on the job, Sam noticed that Kevin seemed busy. He seemed not just normal busy—but buried. Kevin was working long hours. Sam knew that long hours usually meant people were tired and making mistakes. But Sam postponed judgment. He wanted to see more of how Kevin worked.

By now, he knew: Kevin was buried. Sam decided it was time to find out what was going on with Kevin.

During their one-on-one, Sam asked, "Kevin, you've been working on this project for a few weeks now, right?"

Kevin nodded and hid a yawn.

"And you're still behind?" Sam asked.

"I'm working overtime to finish it. I still can't keep up. I tried handing off a piece to Joanie, but she didn't do it right. I had to take it back."

"Let's talk about that. How did you decide what work to delegate to Joanie?" *I suspect Kevin doesn't know how to delegate. I wonder whether it was really Joanie, or whether Kevin had a set idea about the method, not just the results,* Sam thought.

Kevin frowned. "I looked at my list. I made a list of everything I didn't want to do, and I looked for people who had time in their schedules. Joanie had the most time, so I asked her to do the work."

"How did that work fit with Joanie's skills?"

"She should know how to do it. She has done work like that in the past. But she didn't do it right. I asked her to check in with me partway though, and I realized she was doing it wrong."

"What was wrong with it?"

"She didn't follow my design, and she didn't implement the interfaces right."

"Would her way have worked?"

Kevin paused. "I guess so. But I wouldn't have done it that way."

"Kevin, you care about finishing the work in a way that meets the customers' needs, right?" Kevin nodded. Sam continued, "Does it matter *how* Joanie works, as long as she delivers the right results in the time you need them?"

Kevin slumped. "Not really."

Sam continued, "Let's talk about how you can delegate your work. I need you to be thinking about the big picture and doing your management work—you can't delegate that part. Let's look at your technical work and see what you can delegate."

"But I like the technical work. I don't want to give it up."

Sam paused, considering what to say. "I'm not sure you have to completely give it up, but look at your task list. Right now, you're on the critical path for the release. What's going to happen if you don't complete these technical tasks in the next two weeks?"

"The release will be late. I don't want that."

"Let's look at who has the skills and the bandwidth to take on these tasks." Sam and Kevin examined Kevin's list of technical tasks.

"Joanie could do these two tasks. And Bill and Andrea can take over these three. They work well together."

Sam and Kevin reviewed the rest of his task list and identified which tasks Kevin could delegate and to whom. That left Kevin with his management tasks and design reviews.

"If I'm not doing technical work, I'm going to lose my technical skills."

Sam had faced this transition himself years ago when he accepted his first management job. He knew that the more people you have in your group, the harder it is to make a technical contribution. Once you have four people or more in your group, you can't perform technical work and still be a great manager.

Sam looked at Kevin. "You've been a technical leader—a product-focused leader. Now you're managing—people-focused leadership. You still need to be involved in product decisions, but you don't need to be the technical lead. It's time to delegate work so you can develop other technical leads in your group.

"How are you going to approach the conversations with Joanie, Bill, and Andrea?" Sam asked.

"I need to talk to Joanie differently than I talk to Bill and Andrea, right?" Kevin said. Sam nodded. Kevin continued, "Well, maybe I'll talk to her first since I didn't get it right the last time."

"You can explain to Joanie that you made a mistake," Sam advised. "Show her that it's okay to admit a mistake. It may sound paradoxical, but admitting you made a mistake makes it easier for people to trust you."

Kevin thought for a moment, steepling his fingers in front of his face. Finally he said, "Here's what I'll say to Joanie:

'Joanie, I want to talk to you about how I assigned you that task and then pulled it back when you were partway through. I was too concerned with *how* you were performing the work, not with your results. I was wrong to pull the work back. I should have let you finish the work. Your way would have worked as well as mine. I'd like to try this again, and I'm going to do it differently this time.'"

"That sounds good. You might want to give her a chance to express her thoughts, too. What about Bill and Andrea?"

"Since I haven't blown it with them yet, I can say this: "Bill and Andrea, I need you to do these three tasks. I know you two work well together, so divvy up the work as you will. Take a couple of days to let me know how long you think it will take, and let me know what sort of help you want. We'll track the work in our one-on-ones."

"Excellent. Let me know how it goes next week."

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Learning to Delegate

Managers need to focus on managerial work. Some first-level managers still do some technical work, but they cannot assign themselves to the critical path. The point where it's no longer possible to do technical and managerial work depends on the span of management responsibility and the amount of technical work. Giving up technical work is difficult for many technical people because technical work fuels a sense of competence and satisfaction. It's easier to know when technical work is complete than to know when management work is complete.

If you're not sure whether to delegate any of your technical work, review this table to see how much time you *could* devote to technical work.

Decide what you can delegate.   Delegating is a primary skill for managers.[3] Consider delegating technical tasks first. Once you've delegated the technical work, look at management tasks: decide which tasks are strategic and which are tactical. For example, selecting the metrics to include on a management report is strategic; gathering the data is tactical. Tactical work is ripe for delegation.[5]

Management Tasks	3 People	4 People
Meeting time: one-on-one meetings, a team meeting, plus some preparation time	4 hours	5 hours
Managing the project portfolio	1 hour	1 hour
Time spent with your manager	1 hour	1 hour
Time spent with peer managers across the organization	1 hour	1 hour
Problem solving with team members (or with project managers or other managers on behalf of team members)	12 hours (4 hours/ person	16 hours (4 hours/ person
Organizational issues	Unpredictable	
Best-case minimum management time	19 hours	24 hours

Figure 6.1: Management task time

Understand who has the skills to do the work. Look for a match between the skills and aspirations of your staff and the tasks you consider delegating.[8] Consider development opportunities: if someone on your staff wants to move into a leadership role, those tactical tasks may be a great opportunity to begin to understand the management role. (Much of management is strategic work, but starting with the tactical work and moving toward more strategic work can help reduce the learning curve for aspiring managers.) If no one on your staff has the skills or interest to do the work, consider whether you need more people.

Consider delegating an investment. The payoff for delegation isn't always immediate. Don't expect the other person to be 100% productive on a new task. Unless someone has had experience, he or she may not know how to do all aspects of the work. You may still need to coach.[7] Eventually, the investment will result in increased capability and lower risk, because another person understands the task.

Consider the specific results you want. You may have specific

deliverables in mind. Or you may be willing to accept a range of results. Communicate the task parameters including time and quality to the person to whom you're delegating. Focus on the results rather than methods.[13] How-to direction is micromanagement.

It takes courage to delegate.[4] It also requires trust. You must trust that other people can do a good enough job, even if they don't do the task quite as well or exactly the way you would.

Decide how the two of you will monitor progress. Establish periodic checks on progress.[3][10] Use frequent checks with less experienced people, and use fewer with those who are more experienced. Provide encouragement, feedback, and help as needed.

Wednesday End of Day

Sam fell in step with Kevin as they walked out of the building into the parking lot. Kevin didn't look quite as tired as he had on Monday. He was standing up straighter, too.

"Hey, Kevin. How's it going? It's nice to see you leaving at a reasonable hour. Your delegation talks went well?"

"Pretty well," Kevin replied. "Joanie grumped a little, but when I admitted I had been wrong, she came around. She has agreed to take on the task. Bill and Andrea are excited about the new challenge. They really like working together. And my wife is happy to have me home for dinner."

"Excellent! I appreciate you having that difficult conversation with Joanie. It took guts to admit a mistake," Sam said.

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Notice and Appreciate Changes and Contributions

People crave appreciation. People want to be noticed and appreciated for their contributions.[14] Buckingham and Coffman cite regular recognition as a key factor in retaining the best employees.[2] Notice and appreciate each staff member *every week*.

Notice people doing something right. Look for opportunities to comment on what people are doing well. It doesn't have to be a big

How Many People Can You Manage?

Many newly minted managers live in two worlds: they still have technical work, *and* management responsibilities. Inevitably, the new manager squeezes in management tasks between technical work. And that's creating a high possibility of failure—for the manager and the team.

A minimum list of management tasks for a hypothetical new manager with three or four direct reports is shown in Figure 6.1, on page 93.

Plus, there is time spent on organizational issues (probably in meetings), and ongoing work such as budgets, status reports, email, phone messages, requests for information, and the inevitable task switching. These represent the *minimum* management tasks, and the estimates are optimistic; the minimum management tasks may take more time (unfamiliar tasks always take more time), but they seldom take *less* time.

If there aren't too many organizational problems, the manager with three people on her team may have time for *some* technical work. We strongly recommend managers avoid technical work that's on the critical path—it's a no-win situation. When the manager attends to management work, their technical work suffers; when attending to technical work, the team proceeds without a manager.

With four people in her group, the balance between technical work and management work shifts. In the *best case*, that leaves a whopping sixteen hours to deal with organizational issues *and* complete technical tasks. That's not enough time to do either well.

Maybe you've mastered the technical/management juggling act. You're doing both and even have some slack. It won't last long—people who perform well are asked to do more, and soon have more people and responsibilities.

In our experience, most people don't master the juggling act. Unfortunately, when push comes to shove, technical work trumps management work. For new managers, technical work is more familiar and the consequences of dropping technical tasks are more visible. But dropping management tasks has consequences, too.

deal. Small things such as a well-done report, scripts that work, code that's checked in on time, are worth noticing. We don't buy the notion that "that's just part of the job." Work is difficult, so let people know that you've noticed when they are doing well.

Appreciate, don't thank. Appreciation is different from saying "thank you." "Thank you" may be polite, but it isn't very personal. When you appreciate someone, refer to the person, not just the work.[11] Make appreciations clear and specific—and not an evaluation.

We use this form and modify it as appropriate:

"I appreciate you for _____. It helped me in this way: _____."

Appreciate each of your people every week. Notice and appreciate something about each person who reports to you every week.[6] A one-on-one meeting is a great place to give appreciations.

Choose your venue. Most people don't care about plaques, letters to the personnel file, or public rewards. What they care about is sincere appreciation by their peers[12] and their managers. And, they care whether the sincere appreciation is public or private. When you appreciate someone, decide whether you will appreciate privately or publicly. It's always appropriate to give appreciation for their contribution in a private meeting. If you want to also give public recognition, ask the person, unless you've established this as a norm in your group. When in doubt, ask.[2]

Back to Monday

Ginger strode into Sam's office, ready for her one-on-one. "How's it going, Ginger?" Sam greeted her.

"I've been managing myself," Ginger declared. "I haven't called Marketing idiots all week. I'm making progress!"

"Yep, I've noticed that—that's great. I've also noticed some other things.

"Remember last Tuesday, when you were trying to understand what Marketing really wanted in the release meeting? I saw you roll your eyes, and clench your fists when the Marketing VP was talking. And I heard some loud sighs when the release date came up."

Building Self-awareness

Hierarchy amplifies the impact of words and behavior. One senior manager we know couldn't understand why people were afraid of him. "I'm not a scary person," he shouted, thumping the table with each word.

Managers need to be aware of their own emotional state and how their words and behavior affect other people.

It's perfectly normal to become frustrated or upset with issues at work. It's not okay to yell, scream, swear, rant, rave, or threaten (despite some high-profile examples of this behavior). Even facial expressions can have unin-tended consequences. A manager who grimaces when she hears a task is late may send the unintended message that she's angry with the messenger. Soon she won't be hearing anything but happy news.

We don't advocate keeping a poker face at all times. Peo-ple expect managers to have emotions. But if you catch yourself frowning when you hear bad news, let the messen-ger know you're upset about the news, not at them.

When managers are self-aware, they can *respond* to events rather than *react* in emotional outbursts.

"Oh, yeah. I did all of that. I was really frustrated," Ginger admit-ted.

"I'm glad you're aware of how your emotions translate into physical reactions. Here's why it's so important for you to manage how you show your frustration. When you sigh, roll your eyes, or clench your fists, you're telegraphing your frustration. People will inter-pret your frustration in different ways. It's okay to be frustrated. But say that you're frustrated.

"When you *say* you're frustrated," Sam continued, "you can say you're frustrated at the situation, not the person. But unless you tell them, people may think you're mad at them, and they'll be less likely to provide you information—information you need to know."

"Oh, I didn't realize I had that effect on people."

"The higher you are in the organization, the more other people mag-

nify your reactions. That's why it's so important to manage your emotions—not to do away with your emotions, you can't do that—but manage how you express your emotions."

Ginger sighed and then nodded. She realized she had more work to do.

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Manage Yourself

Emotions are a part of life: humans are hardwired to have emotions. Acknowledging your emotions explicitly is more productive than telegraphing your emotions through physical displays.[9] Physical displays show you're not ready to hear what the other person has to say. And, physical displays, especially around subordinates, scare people. When you manage how you respond to your own emotional reactions, you make it easier for people to bring you any news, especially bad news.

Awareness is the first step. Become aware of your physical habits and how you display your emotional state. We know many people who drum their fingers, bang the table and grimace and are completely unaware of it. Even your beloved authors don't always know what we're doing that could be driving someone else crazy (our husbands do). Ask someone you trust for feedback. Notice when people have a reaction you don't expect—pulling back from the table, stepping back—and then notice what *you* are doing and what your emotional state is.

Notice triggers. Once you become aware of what you are doing and what's going on inside, notice the situation. Often particular situations trigger emotional and physical reactions. If you've had run-ins with Marketing in the past, you may assume that the next meeting will be a run-in too and prime yourself for an emotional display.

Choose your response. This is easier said than done! Habits are hard to break, especially unconscious physical responses. But awareness of the trigger and your own emotional state provides a starting place. Coaching can be helpful.

Manage your emotions. People who are unable to manage how they express their emotions may need more than coaching. We've

heard of people who received Botox injections to keep their emotions off their faces. That's not what we mean. We are people, and people have emotions. Screaming and yelling can be manifestations of emotions. But screaming and yelling are not acceptable outlets for your emotions at work. People who cannot or will not manage themselves should not manage other people.[14]

Obtain feedback about how you appear to others. Select two or three people you trust, and ask for feedback on how you behave and respond in various circumstances. You'll probably hear information that confirms you are managing some tasks and people well. You may also hear some surprising or unsettling information about how other people perceive you. Try to remain open to that feedback—whether you agree, it is the other person's *perception*. Remember that if one person says you have a green tail, he may be seeing things. But if several people say you have a green tail, it's time to look behind you to see what's there.

Keep a journal to help you notice how you respond in different circumstances.

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Still Monday

Jason faced a dilemma. Fred, one of his senior developers, was going to leave unless he had an opportunity to try some project management work. Jason knew he needed to discuss career development work with Fred, but he wasn't quite sure how.

"Now that I'm talking to people more often, I'm finding out more about what they want to do. Fred really wants to become a project manager. I don't have a project management job for him, but I don't want him to leave the group. Any ideas?"

"Knowing what people want is the first step. You may not have a project management job right now, but I bet we have a way to help him exercise his project management skills. That way he accomplishes his goals, and we don't lose his domain expertise," replied Sam.

"So, where do I start?"

"What opportunities are there in your group?" asked Sam.