Practical Ways to LEAD & SERVE (MANAGE) OTHERS

MODERN MANAGEMENT MADE EASY: BOOK 2

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Increase Your Capacity and Finish More Projects

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Modern Management Made Easy, Book 2

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5. Is Measuring Time Useful?

Here's a problem most modern managers encounter: the organization changes the products and services the organization wants to offer. That requires the people doing the work change how they work and the tools they use. Where does that leave managers, especially if they no longer work in the work itself?

The managers don't know the details of what people do all day.

When we don't know, we create stories in our heads. And, we tend to measure the outputs, not outcomes. Those outputs are often time-based:

- Time spent at work
- Time in meetings
- Time spent updating the ticket system or the board

None of these measures have any impact on the customers. And, when we measure time, we too often make people feel as if they have to account for their time. People spend time on accounting (updating boards, spreadsheets, timesheets), not on the work.

If you no longer know how people create or test or service the product, how can you assess a person's value? This brings us back to Theory X vs. Theory Y management assumptions.

- If you want to Encourage Flow Efficiency, it doesn't matter how much any one person works. It matters if the team members can also offer and receive feedback and coaching. You might have to help people learn how to Practice Effective Feedback.

- People who don't have time to think, don't learn or experiment. They don't feel safe enough to take the time to change anything.
- If you Extend Trust and measure outcomes, you don't need to know when people work.

Managers who attempt to manage by assessing how much time people spend become incongruent, in at least these ways:

1. Blaming the people for not spending the time the way they, the manager, would.
2. Placating the manager's manager by measuring irrelevant information.

Worse, some managers want to measure what people do by creating mandatory meetings and then assessing the time people spend in meetings.

Should you ever measure the time people spend on work? My reviewers suggested these two examples of when managers should measure the time spent:

1. When you have a customer contract where time spent is part of the contract. Andrea Goulet, of Corgibytes said, "Our clients read the time reports. It's not something that we're just doing to micromanage. It's a communication tool. Also, we use it as a way to make sure we can build in as much scheduling flexibility and autonomy as possible. We also strongly encourage people to work no more than 40 hours per week. When we didn't track time, many folks would work and not stop. We knew it was happening but didn't have data. Lastly, and this was a big insight for us, it's not just keyboard time that's billable—thinking time is tracked, too."
2. If you want to change estimate modes, such as moving from relative sizing to cycle time, you might need to measure the actuals against the estimates.

I couldn't think of a third example. You might have another example of a time when you measured the time people spent—and the people you served still trusted you.

In my experience, when managers measure time *at* work, they use that measure as a surrogate for understanding and finding ways to measure the *results* of the work. These managers measure the outputs (time spent) instead of outcomes (finished products or services).

5.1 Myth: I Can Measure the Work by Where People Spend Time

Gabe and Cynthia walked to the cafeteria together.

"Have you heard the new thing that Andrew is doing?" Gabe asked, shaking his head.

"What now?" Cynthia asked.

"We have to fill out time cards with our actual time on them. Andrew wants to know how much time we spend at work. The more time, the better."

Cynthia stopped. "Are you serious? What's he going to do with that information?"

Gabe said, "He's going to see who the 'star' players are."

Cynthia sighed. "I thought I'd seen everything, but this takes the cake. We work as teams. Why would he do this?"

"Yeah. I think he's feeling pressure from his management," Gabe said. "Hey, what if we explain we're supposed to be about 'sustainable pace.' This crazy time card thing is going to make the pace anything but sustainable—especially if he wants more hours. I don't understand why he thinks he can measure our output by the time we spend here. I have good days and bad days. Sometimes, I think

I spend a lot less time here on the good days and produce twice as much! Sometimes, I stop writing code on the bad days, so I don't create four times as many bugs!"

Cynthia grinned. "Well, I've certainly had those days. How can we make Andrew see the error of his ways? Maybe get Tina, the other director, to talk to him?"

"Maybe. Or maybe we should explain that our progress doesn't have much to do with the time we spend at work. Maybe we should baseline our features per week now and measure our features per week after he does this time card thing, especially if he insists on overtime. What we have to do is make our pain his, because this is total craziness."

5.2 Time Is Not Results

I've seen managers try to reward employees by the number of hours that the employees' cars were in the parking lot. People can game that measurement easily—leave the car in the parking lot for the week.

One colleague gamed the system that way— until the snowplow plowed around his car after a surprise snowstorm. He had already gone home for the storm and had left the car. His management was quite surprised and quite angry about the employee's deception.

When you use time as a measurement for how good people's work is, you beg them to game the system and exhibit some of this crazy behavior. Time at work does not equate to good work. It never has, and it never will. Oh, you can't work without spending time working somewhere and on the work itself, but that doesn't mean that you have to spend lots of extra time at work.

5.3 How Many Hours in a Day?

Everyone's day will be different, but there is some reasonable upper limit to how much people can work in a day. People can work up to about eight good hours a day on an intellectually challenging job before mental exhaustion sets in.

Some people might be useful and work for fewer than eight hours. If the team members pair or mob on the work, they might only be able to work about six hours together before they exhaust their ability to think.

Long hours don't mean that people produce more. (See "The Research is Clear: Long Hours Backfire for People and Companies[1].") Some results of long hours:

- We make mistakes because we are tired.
- We live in higher stress, which results in health problems. That might increase the organization's insurance costs.
- The more tired and stressed we feel, the more likely we are to miss work or even leave because of the job. Replacing a knowledge worker might cost two or three times their salary.

If you want people to accomplish more work, then restrict their work time to no more than eight hours a day. That includes weekends and evenings.

You might be wondering, "Huh? Restrict the time at work?" Yes. You may have heard of Parkinson's Law, "Work expands to fill the time allotted."

When you restrict work time, people focus and tend to collaborate. (Unless you've created draconian personal objectives.) Their throughput increases because their focus and collaboration increases.

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[1] https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies

5.4 Manage the Work in Progress

When you timebox the time people spend at work, they start to make decisions about their work:

- People postpone the not-important-enough-yet work.
- They begin to say "no" to more work.
- They rank the remaining work.

They start to manage their WIP (Work in Progress). And, with any luck, they work in flow efficiency to finish more work as a team. (See Encourage Flow Efficiency.)

People are smart. They will decide to *complete* the most essential work. If they are not sure, they will ask you. Expect some tough questions about which projects/work are most important. That's okay because if you are a manager, you need to be able to answer those difficult questions.

Remember, people are not machines. If you don't rank the work in a project portfolio, they will decide which work they will do and when.

5.5 Which Meetings Can We Kill?

Once you manage the project portfolio and flow work through the ranked projects with teams, it's time to review the time people spend in meetings.

If you decide that you only have eight hours to work, one thing you must do is make decisions about meetings. Do you need to attend those meetings? Maybe not. Maybe someone else can go for you. Is that meeting essential for anyone?

If a meeting is essential, it will have an agenda—that the meeting facilitator sent in advance. It will have minutes. It will have a list of action items, and someone will manage them so that people are accountable for their action items.

If you attend meetings where there are no agendas, minutes, or action items, maybe you don't have to attend. Now, don't just drop the meeting on the floor. That's rude.

However, if you tell the meeting leader that unless you see an agenda, minutes, and action items for the meeting, you will not be participating in future meetings, then you have provided enough notice to stop your participation. And, you have provided an out for the meeting leader, too.

You might want to add a measurement called the Return On Time Invested to the end of every meeting. (See *Behind Closed Doors: Secrets of Great Management* BCD05 and *Create Your Successful Agile Project: Collaborate, Measure, Estimate, Deliver* ROT17 for more details.)

Use this five-point scale to ask people to report how much value they received for the time they invested in the meeting.

ROTI Ratings

0: No benefit received for time invested.
1: A little better than 0. Some benefit, but not commensurate with time invested.
2: Value received equal to time invested.
3: A little better than even return.
4: High benefit. Value received greater than time invested.

Figure 5.1: ROTI Ratings

The meeting leader or facilitator can ask people to create a histogram of the meeting's value to each person, as in this image:

ROTI Histogram

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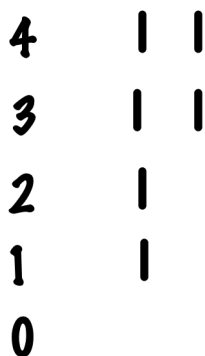|		
4		I	I
3		I	I
2		I	
1			I
0			

Figure 5.2: ROTI Histogram

In this example, I would ask the people who labeled the meeting a 2 or 1 for more information. Maybe I didn't run the meeting well. Maybe we needed some preparation time. Maybe they weren't the right people to participate.

Meetings can offer value. You might find that you can exercise leadership by helping to change your organization's meeting culture.

Once you address meeting time, you might realize that people—including you—might need to reorganize their days.

5.6 What Does Your Day Look Like?

As with meetings, email might not be the first thing people think of when you tell them to timebox their days.

I find that I have about three chunks of time that I can work in a day: a two-hour piece in the morning and two other two-hour chunks in the afternoon. That adds up to six hours of work in a day. When I ask colleagues and clients about their days, they often

tell me they have fewer chunks of work time in their days. The more senior the manager, the fewer large chunks of time, because the manager tends to have more meetings and interruptions. Your mileage and workday will vary.

Technical people might choose to finish work in their significant chunks of work time, rather than spend that time on email or chat. Encourage behavior that helps a person or a team finish customer-valuable work, rather than on email or chat.

Of course, the more geographically distributed the team is, the more email or chat is a part of the team's work. That's unfortunate because there is plenty of other emails that are *not* part of a technical person's work that arrives in an inbox. The more email a person has to process, the less time for technical work. The longer a person can go between processing emails, the more technical work a person can do. It is that simple.

One of the most productive things you can do for email processing is to turn off any signals that tell you that more email has arrived. Assume you have more email. It's a reasonable assumption. Then, decide how many times a day you can safely process email.

When I explain this trick to my coaching clients, there is always a pregnant pause. "But, I'm supposed to answer email within five minutes of receiving it!"

If people want you to answer a question right away, then they should pick up the phone or text you. Email is for low-bandwidth communication—a fact that runs counter to too many corporate cultures.

5.7 When Do You Need to Respond?

Does your device give you an audible notification for every email, call, or text? Many of my clients tell me they are at the mercy of their phones.

Managers often feel the need to respond right away. Worse, they might then interrupt a technical person or a team if the manager needs an answer.

Back in Decide When to Conduct One-on-Ones I discussed the cost of an interruption to a technical person and a manager. Everyone deserves time to think.

See if you can create working agreements across the organization about when to use email, text, or calls. How will you agree—as an organization—about when to use synchronous and asynchronous communication? Not everything deserves to interrupt you. Not every request needs an immediate response.

You might need to set guardrails for yourself, if not the organization, about when people should expect a response to the various ways of contacting you.

5.8 Measure Results, Not Time

Knowledge workers work at different paces on different days. The way to help people work faster is to encourage them to work together (pairing, swarming, or mobbing) on small requirements.

Instead of time, think about the results you want. I find that I want to see these kinds of results or outcomes:

- A demonstration that shows how we increased our knowledge of the problem.
- A demonstration or other results that help us learn more about our risks.
- A demonstration that offers us feedback about the product.

Each of these outcomes reflects what the customers buy—that's what we pay people to do. And, when a team works in flow efficiency, they can create these demonstrations faster.

You pay your software people for completed features. If you want more features, make sure they work absolutely no more than forty hours per week. Fewer hours may help people be more productive. Working more hours per week is guaranteed to get you worse results.

That's why working in flow efficiency makes so much sense instead of resource efficiency.

5.9 Create Experiments to See Where People Spend Time

Too often, I discover that what my gut thinks is true about the organization is false. The way I discover this is with data.

When I've run these experiments, the results surprised people in the past. The first experiment was creating a value stream map to label the valuable work and not-valuable work.

5.9.1 Assess the Value Stream Map

I once consulted with an organization that required signoffs from managers when a team completed their work. I created a value stream map so they could see when the team completed their work and the additional time needed for the signoff work.

When I showed them that the time required for signoff was *as long* as the time the team took to finish their work, the managers were surprised. We discussed the problems the managers wanted to solve. They decided they could specify the outcomes the managers wanted, and the constraints, and let the team decide how to achieve those outcomes inside the constraints.

See examples of a value stream map in Help the Team Measure Their Cycle Time.