

Practical Ways to LEAD & SERVE (MANAGE) OTHERS

MODERN MANAGEMENT MADE EASY: BOOK 2



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Practical Ways to Lead and Serve (Manage) Others

Modern Management Made Easy, Book 2

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Practical ink

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10. Who Deserves a Job Here?

Have you been in a position where you—or your manager—wanted to save a problematic employee? Maybe you felt as if you bent over backward to keep an employee? Even if you knew that person wasn't helping, you might have felt guilty about "pushing" a person out.

I've met managers who feel guilty that they aren't able to help the person perform the necessary work. Some managers think they can spend more and more time with the person who can't do the job. Other managers believe they owe the person feedback and coaching for a year. And if the person still can't perform the job? Too many managers I coach feel guilty they couldn't turn this person's performance around.

Your job as a manager is to create a harmonic whole. That means you do what you can to help the people you serve. All the people you serve need to fulfill both the technical and interpersonal parts of their jobs. If anyone can't, your job is to help that person move out of the organization.

Don't placate a person who can't do the job.

The faster you act to either help a person succeed or move the person out, the better a manager you are. You're serving the harmonic whole.

Not every employee has a place at every organization. If you help someone find a new job elsewhere in your organization or outside your organization, everyone will be happier. You'll free a bunch of your management time. The team will be thrilled they don't have to work around a problematic person.

And, every time I've helped someone find a new role somewhere else, that person has thanked me. You might experience the same.

10.1 Myth: I Can Save Everyone

"Everyone is worth saving. Everyone is worth saving." Jimmy muttered under his breath as he walked into my office. "Hi, Steve. I'm here for our one-on-one. I have a real problem."

"OK, let's hear it."

"Frieda is a problem in my group."

"Jimmy, we have discussed Frieda before. I thought you were going to put her on a get-well plan last week."

"But, Steve, everyone is worth saving!"

"Jimmy, listen to me. It's time to do a little addition. How many people do you have in your group?"

"Eight."

"And how much time do you have to spend with them in a week?"

"About twelve hours total. That's it."

"How much time have you spent with each of them this past week?"

"Um, I have to think." Jimmy spent a few seconds thinking. Then he stopped and paled. "I haven't spent time with anyone except Frieda."

"So, you have spent all of your time with the person who is delivering the least, right?"

Jimmy nodded.

"And none of your time with the people who deliver the most, right?"

Jimmy nodded again.

“Does that sound reasonable to you?”

Jimmy slowly shook his head.

“So why do you think you can save everyone? Why do you think everyone is worth saving?”

Jimmy sighed. “Steve, Frieda is a smart person. She’s nice.”

Steve agreed and nodded. “She is smart. Nice? In some circumstances.”

“She needs a job,” Jimmy said.

Steve cocked his head to the side. “Jimmy, we are not running a charity. Frieda does need a job, but she doesn’t need a job from us.”

“Steve, I don’t know what to do.”

“Jimmy, you *do* know what to do; we’ve discussed it. You don’t want to help Frieda leave because you think you will be a bad guy, and it goes against your values. I’ve offered to help you, and you’ve turned me down. Twice. Now, you either let me help you today, or I’ll do it myself. You came in here muttering ‘Everyone is worth saving’ as if you were going to convince me. You are not going to convince me.”

Jimmy sighed.

Steve continued. “But I’ve called Trinh over at our competitor. He is interested in Frieda’s resume. He knows that we’ve had trouble with her, and he’s still interested. Now, are you going to start the get-well plan, or am I?”

10.2 Why Can’t You Save Everyone?

Employees don’t succeed for any number of reasons.

Often, it’s a cultural fit problem you didn’t catch during the interview. But even if it’s not cultural fit, if you’ve provided honest and

open feedback and the employee can't or won't change, it's up to the manager, or the self-managing team, to help the employee move on.

When Your Company Can't or Won't Act

Some organizations fear firing a person. Or, they say, "We never fire or lay anyone off." If you have that problem, you might not be able to help a person leave your team. Your company won't act to support you.

You have choices. Never give the person a raise or a promotion—not even a cost-of-living raise. Remove that person from your team. Even if you have nothing for that person to do, do not let that person join a team.

When companies feel as if they "can't do anything," they actively create a placating culture. They are willing to pay the person's salary so they don't have to act. You can act in the small, for your team or department, instead of for the greater whole. However, your job is to create a harmonic whole. If one of the people you serve cannot create that whole, prevent them from creating disharmony.

Every time I've had to fire someone, I retrospected on the issues. How could I have handled it differently, from hiring to firing? I often think of having to fire someone as a management mistake. Yes, managers make mistakes and we need to acknowledge them and move on. That's one of the reasons I like to help an employee move on.

You might help an employee move to another group that's a better fit if you have a sufficiently large organization. But you might have to help someone leave the company altogether.

10.3 Why Help an Employee Leave Your Team?

When someone isn't working out, that person might "unjell" the entire team, the person might prevent the project from making progress technically, or the person might not do any work. I've seen all three of these problems.

In this case, when Frieda didn't get her way, she was an unjeller. When she attempted to participate in a meeting, she managed to push people farther apart.

Frieda's actions decreased the team's psychological safety.

For example, one problem Frieda's team was trying to solve was scheduling lab time. With Frieda, the team was unable to brainstorm solutions and come to a decision. First, team members were unable to stick to their timebox for generating ideas, because, during the brainstorming, Frieda wanted to discuss the solutions, even when the designated facilitator explained they were generating possibilities.

The team eliminated several possibilities. Then, the team moved to elaborate on the remaining ideas. However, Frieda kept returning to some of the discarded ideas. "But those were good ideas," she protested. The facilitator decided to discuss Frieda's meeting behavior with her. "Frieda, if you can't stick with our process, I want you to leave the meeting."

"But, I have to use the lab, too."

"But we all agreed we finished generating ideas. It's time for us to discuss *these* ideas."

"But I like *that* idea. I don't care if I agreed before. I like that idea now."

One of the other meeting participants said, "I'm leaving. This meeting is a waste of my time." Two of the other three people left also.

Frieda had exhibited meeting behavior like this before. Her colleagues were no longer willing to work with her again for problem-solving.

When a team has a problem-solving meeting, and team members can't solve a problem because of one person, they have to solve the team membership problem first.

10.4 Understand Team “Fairness”

Jimmy, the manager, was concerned about being “fair” and “nice” to Frieda. He'd temporarily forgotten the rest of the team. He felt as if he wasn't fair to Frieda, but the real problem was that Jimmy was beyond fair to Frieda—and he wasn't fair to the rest of the team.

He was incongruent, placating Frieda. He didn't create an environment where the entire team could thrive.

When you manage team membership, you might not feel as if you are fair to the person you are helping to leave, but you are. And, you are fair to the rest of the team.

Your team's members might be feeling many things: They may feel betrayed for the lack of your attention or for the amount of attention you are spending on the employee who is not working out. Those team members might be wondering if you can even see the problems. Or they might think you don't care about them.

You don't know what the team members think unless you ask them. In my experience, the other team members feel frustration with the slow-to-act manager.

The faster you manage the issues around an unjeller, or any other team membership problem, the faster the team will thank you. You can help the team by assisting the team members learn to offer feedback and coaching themselves. And, by practicing with you, if they like.

I prefer it when the team can solve its membership problems. That doesn't always work. When it doesn't, the manager must solve team problems.

If the team can't work as a team, you're not doing your job as a manager.

When you help an employee move out of a team—especially one who is an unjeller like Frieda—you help the team. Team members will become more energized, happier, and freer. And their outcomes will increase. Why? Because the unjeller no longer prevents the entire team from collaborating. The team can create or restore psychological safety.

10.5 Consider When You Should Save an Employee

Think twice or even three times before you spend a lot of time to “save” a problematic employee.

Not every employee has a place in your organization:

- Does this person fit the culture?
- Does the organization still need someone in this role?
- Does the person have to change how he or she works to better work with the team?

If it's a question of training, I much prefer to offer training to someone who fits the culture.

Here's the question I ask:

Am I better off with or without this person?

Here's how I frame my thinking about the “better off” question:

1. Does this person fit the culture? Can they work within the organization's and team's stated working agreements? If they can, I continue. If not, I work to help them leave. For example, I once helped a quite-directive manager find a job elsewhere so I could replace him with a more collaborative manager.
2. Does this person have sufficient interpersonal skills? Many people in high tech don't have excellent interpersonal skills. However, if they have the minimum, maybe I can find a role where they can succeed. If the person is willing to work on their behaviors, I'll try that, too. If the person doesn't have the minimum interpersonal skills, I help them leave. One developer had only two modes: he either yelled at or blamed other people when things didn't work. I helped him find a new position outside the company.
3. Can they do the technical work? If they only need some training, I work to get them training and coaching. However, if I haven't seen any evidence of their technical abilities, and I've offered training and coaching, then I help them find a new role elsewhere. I've had a lot of good results assisting people to learn new technical skills for development, testing, and management.
4. Is the person interested in changing their skills: interpersonal or technical? If not, I help them find a new job. If I decide that this person might add value, I create an action plan, so we both know how to define success and see change. I've only had one developer and one tester not want to learn new skills.

Are you worried about helping a person find a new role elsewhere? When I realized how valuable I could be to the people who didn't fit, I changed my mind.

10.6 Create Action Plans

If you decide to save someone, you (or someone you ask) commit to investing a lot of time in that person's growth. I prefer to limit the amount of time I spend on investing in someone else's growth.

I tend to timebox action plans to between six and eight weeks. Depending on the work, you might need to offer more or less time. For example, if you arrange for training, you might not be able to start the action plan until the person has completed training.

Consider creating an action plan with:

- Weekly deliverables that are either done or not done. The deliverables need clear criteria, so everyone can see and agree on the person's progress. Or, lack thereof.
- Consider "plan to leave" decision points in the action plan. How will you handle any of these possibilities:
 - If the person no longer wants to continue with the action plan?
 - If the person cannot deliver any of the deliverables?
- Define your agreement for helping the person find another role.

One last note about these action plans: anytime I've had trouble gaining agreement on the weekly deliverables, I've soon realized the person either couldn't fit with the culture or didn't have enough technical skills to succeed.

I've succeeded several times helping those people find other jobs.

10.7 Help the Person Succeed Elsewhere

One of the first times I spoke publicly about this, one of the audience members had a question: "Where do you help the other person look

for a job?”

My answer, which surprised everyone, was, “At a competitor.”

The room erupted in laughter, which surprised me. I was serious. Why? Because the person might have industry skills that might be transferable to the competitor.

Long ago, I worked in a variety of machine vision companies in the Boston area. We all knew about each other. Many of us managers knew each other. The industry wasn’t that big at the time.

One of my testers didn’t fit the culture. I called my counterpart manager—so he could hear the sincerity in my voice—and told him I had a person who didn’t fit. Was he interested in the tester?

We spoke for a few minutes, and yes, the other manager was interested. The competitor interviewed the tester, made an offer, and the tester left inside of two weeks.

That approach might not fit for you. But, do consider helping the person find a new role, sooner rather than later. That might mean you offer to write a reference—and clarify what you will and won’t say. You might offer the names of recruiters, or introductions to other managers elsewhere.

Decide what fits for you.

However, do not keep people around because you feel sorry for them. The good people will leave. The people who remain can’t deliver and can’t interact with the people around them.

10.8 Act Promptly

If you need to help someone leave, don’t let the situation fester. The longer it takes you to act, the less respect the remaining people have for you. You can’t discuss your actions with the rest of the people, but you can act promptly.