

How to Manage **SMART PEOPLE**



by Scott Berkun

The other day, over lunch, a friend recounted how her boss was just like the manager from the movie *Office Space*. After a few stories of cubicle horror related to said manager, she looked up at me and asked, “Am I an idiot? Or did something I did in this or a previous life make me deserve this?”

I didn’t know what to say, other than that no one deserves to have a bad manager (well, almost no one). Certainly this friend, who is bright, hard working, and fun, doesn’t deserve one. But unfortunately there is a normal distribution of manager quality, and many people with the job title of manager don’t quite rise to the challenges of the role. It’s often not their fault; sometimes they’ve just never had a good manager themselves to model after. Then again, other times they’ve just focused on the wrong things.

What follows is some advice for managers on how to manage people, especially talented people. I worked for nine years at Microsoft, sometimes managing projects, sometimes managing people, but always with a manager above me. I think I’m smart, but many of the people who have worked for me definitely were. Over the years I’ve experienced many mistakes and successes in both how I was managed, and how I managed others. What follows is a short distillation of some of what I’ve learned. There’s no one way to manage people, but there are some approaches that I think most good managers share.

MANAGEMENT DEFINED

I once had a manager that his other reports and I called “the bossman.” We called him this in jest, making fun of his authority, because it was so rare that he needed to use it. Instead, arguments always centered on some problem that needed to be solved, and what the best approach would be to solve it. If there was a disagreement, he’d restate the goals and expectations, make sure everyone was still on the same page, and then lead a discussion of possible alternatives. Working for him always felt like a partnership. Decisions were made on the basis of their merit, and any point of view was allowed, provided it added value to the discussion. He didn’t care if he was right or wrong, only that the best ideas survived. In years of working for this guy, I can only think of a handful of incidents where he asked me to do something that didn’t already make some degree of sense to me. His authority, though obvious since he was my boss, was rarely something he had to exercise or use as a tool to get things done. Was this guy a good manager? It depends whom you ask.

For many people and organizations, management is considered in relatively strict and authority-based terms. The manager, or the boss, is the person who has authority and responsibility over a bunch of other people. Often he or she can hire and fire people, give raises, decide who works on what, and has political and social access to other important people in the company. Depending on where you work, these things are true to varying degrees. I learned that the more you talk to different people in different lines of work about managers, the more you learn how differently defined the role and job can be. There are also huge differences in what employees in different

organizations expect their managers to do for them. What is expected of managers in one organization would be a revelation in another.

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My experience with “the bossman” taught me that managers have many undocumented, unsaid, but incredibly important functions. Managers have more to do with enabling the happiness and productivity of the people that work for them than anyone else in the organization. A manager, at any level of hierarchy, from line project manager to CEO, has an emotional responsibility to their reports, or to the people who are dependent on them. Like a parent in a family, or a coach of a sports team, a manager sets the tone for dialogue (open and thoughtful, or defensive and confrontational?), enables or prevents a fun work environment, and interprets or ignores the corporate rules and structure, for a daily practice of shared work. While managers are hired to get stuff done for their employer, they also make a personal commitment to each of their reports by being their boss. The manager automatically takes on more responsibility for the career of their employee than anyone else in the organization or company. They might ignore this responsibility, or do a crappy job of it, but the responsibility is still theirs.

I look at the “bossman” as an example of a very effective project manager. I think he hired people very carefully, trying to find people that would work within his management philosophy. He chose people who were self-motivated and confident enough that he didn’t have to expend much energy figuring out how to get them to work hard. Then he created an environment where good ideas rose to the top, further encouraging smart people to want to contribute. “The bossman” made working for him feel like a proper relationship: He got something from us, and we got something from him.

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I think that this kind of management style requires more skill and savvy than a more hierarchical, drill-sergeant type of manager. Unlike the latter, the former demands comfort with degrees of ambiguity, and the confidence to allow reports to openly disagree, or intellectually trump, their manager. But from my experience, this open management style is the only way to have a “best idea wins” kind of culture.

However, I know some people who would have criticized ‘the bossman’ as a manager who was not in control of his team. If you walked into the room at a brainstorming session, or group discussion, it wasn’t always clear who the head honcho was. They’d also say that he delegated too many decisions down to the people that worked for him, and perhaps trusted them too much. I suppose the final analysis has to come

down to the results. If the quality of work produced by the team is high, and group morale and motivation are skyrocketing, then the often fuzzy lines of hierarchy and the open communication style can't really be criticized.

More than anything else, talented people want to be in environments that both appreciate and cultivate their talents. Any successful manager of talented people has to come in every day, to every meeting, and directly work towards making this happen. This doesn't mean coddling people, or denying the team's goals in favor of making someone feel good. Instead it's about making actions and decisions that both clarify how people's talents apply to the team goals, and working to keep the team happy, motivated, and focused in that application.

THE NATURE OF SMART OR TALENTED PEOPLE

Everyone is talented. Certainly not everyone is as talented as everyone else, but every individual has certain things they are good at, and certain things they suck at. Assuming you are a manager, your first task is to figure out what talents each of the people working for you have. This is not as easy. It requires more than looking at their resume or reading their current job description. Most of the important talents that people have live underneath the over-processed job descriptions and functional roles most organizations have created for talented people to live in. Good managers must step back from the hierarchy, bureaucracy, and formalization, and actually see people not just for what they do, but for what they can do that they currently are not doing. This includes things that they may never have had the chance to do, as well as talents

that they may not have recognized themselves. A manager who treats his reports as cogs in a wheel is guaranteed to get the performance of a cog in a wheel. But a manager that develops and grows people into new strengths and abilities will always get more out of their team than their cog-minded peers will of theirs.

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Once, at a lecture I gave, some managers in the room balked at this idea, joking that not everyone on their team was particularly talented. (If you're reading this, and you know who you are, please place a big L on your forehead now. You are now banned from the rest of this essay :)). Even if you don't have a team of rock stars, it's your job as manager to either work with the people you have to make them better, define their roles to match their strengths, or to manage them out of your group/team/company. But no matter how you deal with it, it's your job. That's why you get paid the big bucks, or in all probability, the bigger bucks than the people working for you.

Although, it is fair to say that different kinds of organizations expect different things out of their managers and employees. Sometimes the work involved is more repetitive and cog-like than not. The job might not require creative thinking, or expect people to make improvements to processes and approaches as part of their job. If that's the case, then hopefully it's been made clear to managers and employees before they are

hired. Hierarchical models do make sense if the majority of work is in the domain of some kind of repetitive actions, rather than generating ideas, or dealing with new and complex situations. In the end, good managers know to use as little hierarchy and authority as needed for the group to be effective, regardless of the domain.

MAKING PEOPLE VISIBLE

Stars need to shine. Managers are granted some amount of visibility into the larger organization (and often can work to obtain more), and it's up to the manager to dole out some of that visibility down to their reports. While managers need to establish themselves, and manage peer and senior level politics, they also need to help establish the people on their team along with them. It's a great thing for a manager to be seen helping new stars rise. People will say, "Who's that smart woman over there?" And the answer will be, "Oh, that's Sally. She's on John's team." When people see that somehow you're able to cultivate and grow smart people, you win more acclaim than if you presented the ideas yourself. I think if good ideas are in abundance, and the culture promotes and rewards their creation, there's much less competition for credit for it.

In the unspeakable acts department, there is never any reason to take credit from a report. This only puts poison in your own well. If there is any ambiguity as to who came up with what idea or is responsible for some achievement, yield in favor of your report (or if it was a real collaboration, and not a manager-fabricated one, liberally mention their name with yours, as in "Sally and I..."). Smart people will repay you

for your generosity many times over with their trust. On the other hand, since smart people often care more about their ideas than anything else, if they can't trust you with them, they're unlikely to trust you with anything else either.

ASK THEM WHAT THEY NEED TO KICK ASS

The following question is one of my favorite tools as a manager: "What do you need from me in order to kick ass on this project?" Asking this question of a report invariably scares the shit out of them. It's a cut to the chase, where you, as manager, lay out on the table the magic wish list of possibilities, and ask them to put their cards on the table. If a good discussion ensues, you then have the opportunity to actually deliver some of the things they might need. All the pet complaints they've been harboring have a chance to surface, and perhaps, simply fade away in the face of your brutal honesty and openness as a manager.

The management theory behind why this can work is this: assuming you acknowledge that people who work for you might be smart, talented, or both, you have to find a way to communicate this to them. The simplest and most important way is to allow them to participate (not dominate) in defining how you will manage them. Asking them what they need from you is an enormous act of respect. You are putting them, for a moment, on a nearly even playing field with you. But it is also an invitation to them to step up, and fully invest themselves in their work. This is because if they don't say they need something, they must admit to themselves that there's no external reason that they're not kicking ass on the project.

But of course, if not applied carefully, this approach can backfire. The burden is on the manager to make the conversation an open and positive one, without getting defensive or giving them reason not to disclose the information you're asking for. The insecure manager, the non-communicative manager, the manager who makes everything about them, will generally fail with this approach. They'll start off okay, but as soon as anything about their management approach, personality, working style, or other aspects of their management qualities come into question, they'll get defensive, and retreat back into their authority, and end the discussion. It's really a form of denial. To be a manager means accepting feedback on how you manage.

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One practical way to overcome this starts with a meeting. The manager sets up a meeting with the employee and opens a discussion about how they like to be managed. The manager should explain the purpose of the meeting, and ask clarifying questions about what the report says. Generally, the manager should say nothing about their own opinions. Zero. Zilch. Zip. Instead, their job is to listen, help the report clarify their thoughts and then go away and think about what they said.

The reason why the manager needs to shut up is that they have all the authority. If they really want to understand what their employee needs from them as a manager, they'll only be honest if they believe they won't be judged for it. As soon as the manager starts in with, "but why don't you just do X?" or, "sure, sure, but I've learn that Y

is really the best way to...” the conversation has effectively ended. Some more assertive people might argue further and put up a good fight, but many people won’t.

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I’ve found that in many cases, the easiest time to have this sort of conversation is when you go through a reorg, take over a new team, or have someone new join your team. I’ve found that when the slate is clean there’s less expectation and relationship baggage to deal with. If you don’t have a clear point in time, that’s ok. Do it anyway. Be decisive and decide to improve your management of your talent right now. If there are problems you’re capable of fixing or things that you could be doing to improve your team, you won’t know unless you take the initiative to find out. More assertive people might call you out and set up this kind of meeting with you, and they deserve bonus points for that, but it’s the manager’s job to make discussions about management happen.

In terms of the actual conversation, most of the time, most of what you’ll hear are simple and reasonable adjustments to how certain things are done. Some people might say that they know of better ways to run the meetings you organize. Or that they’d appreciate more of a balance of positive feedback (which they feel their work warrants) with critical feedback. But who knows. They might tell you something that

no one else in your career has thought to say, that can dramatically improve your abilities as a manager. It's in your interest to make them comfortable giving you this kind of commentary. Offer up something you are specifically trying to get better at, and ask them for their opinion. I think I've often gotten much better feedback on my management skills from people I've managed, than from the people I've worked for.

The big risk here that some managers have complained about is that now the manager has to actually go think about what the employee said, which can be complex and time consuming. My response: Shut up. It's your job. What else are you doing that is more important than trying to find a way to get your employees to do their best work?

RESPECT WHAT TALENTS THEY HAVE, THAT YOU DO NOT (AND HIRE WITH THIS IN MIND)

I'm a fan of sports analogies to management, so here's one: every team sport requires many different skills. No one player is the best at everything, and winning games requires each player to understand their specific role, the roles others play, and how they all need to fit together to work. Business or technical organizations are no different. Things only go well if everyone understands (and is comfortable with) their role, knows the roles of others, and has some understanding of how it all fits together. Good managers should be easily seen as coaches (not the Bobby Knight, chair-throwing type, but the John Wooden, nurturing-leader type), who value the different roles, and try to bring together the right kind of chemistry to make good things happen.

If you are a manager, it's unlikely that you were born that way. For awhile, you probably had the job that one of the people who work for you currently has. You used to be more specialized, and have a well-defined expertise. This means that your natural bias will be towards over-involving yourself in that role, and under-involving your-

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self in the other roles people play on your team. You'll also probably simultaneously over-value the role that you grew up in. It's human nature. Perhaps you used to be a developer, you liked being a developer, and you think you're good at developing. So when an engineering issue comes up that impacts marketing, interface design and localization, odds are you'll tend to focus most on the engineering point of view, which might not always be the most important one. Odds are also good that if you do this often enough, you will destabilize your team, undermine its other strengths, and lead you and the team to great shame and tragic ruin. (Ok, maybe not. But it will impact what kinds of issues people bother raising in front of you.) As the manager, your philosophical biases often become the team's philosophical biases. You have to go out of your way to periodically allow your own points of view to be evaluated, questioned, and improved.

Sometimes the only way to make this happen is to bring an outsider in to evaluate the hidden biases an organization has, someone who can make commentary and recom-

mendations without fear of political recriminations. You can only have the best ideas surface if you're drawing from a wide pool of perspectives, including those different or even in conflict with your own.

Another solution is this: First acknowledge that you have weaknesses, both in skills and in knowledge. Second, admit that your ignorance hurts not only the product or website, but the team itself. Third, get help in hiring experts for roles you are not familiar with, and go out of your way to involve them, and their perspectives, in your decision making process. Deliberately hire first-rate, strong willed people to represent disciplines that you tend to undervalue. Force yourself to be on the top of your own game, and to make sure it's not bias and ignorance that drive you, but good judgment refined by divergent perspectives.

(SMALL ESOTERIC NOTE THAT PROBABLY ISN'T WORTH READING: Originally this essay's opening paragraph made (mis)use of the term [law of averages](#), implying that half of all managers were below [average](#) in quality, when more accurately I should have stated that half of all managers were below the [median](#) level of managerial quality. I replaced this phrase instead by referring to the [normal distribution](#), which I believe applies to managers, diffusing the whole mean/average/median fiasco. You see, unexpectedly, my originally inaccurate use of the term "average" unleashed a torrential flood of, shall we say, unkind feedback in my general direction, regarding my misuse of terminology. This note is presented for both entertainment purposes [yes, there are people that will pick on your essays about management if you are sloppy with your secondary points that include statistical terminology, who knew], and in recognition that a modification of this essay occurred as a result of said feedback, which though

I'm very appreciative for, wasn't generally very kind ["learn math" doesn't really offer much practical advice, though it did make me laugh]. And for the record, since several people asked without giving a return email address, I did take probability, statistics and mathematics classes at CMU, despite my sloppy use of the concepts. Just goes to remind me that sometimes errors I see in other people's stuff might just be oversights, rather than reflections of ignorance.) — 2/4/2004

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