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Basic Management Skills: The Human Factor

*This is one of a series written by Gerard M
Blair and first published in 1992-3 by The
Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE)
Engineering Management Journal.*

The series includes

- **The Human Factor**
- *Presentation Skills*
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- *What Makes a Great Manager*

by Gerard M Blair

In the management of a small team, the human factor is crucial to success. This article considers possible motivators and a simple framework for dealing with people.

When you are struggling with a deadline or dealing with delicate decisions, the last thing you want to deal with is "people". When the fight is really on and the battle is undecided, you want your team to act co-operatively, quickly, rationally; you do not want a disgruntled employee bitching about life, you do not want a worker who avoids work, you do not want your key engineer being tired all day because the baby cries all night. But this is what happens, and as a manager you have to deal with it. Few "people problems" can be solved quickly, some are totally beyond your control and can only be contained; but you do have influence over many factors which affect your people and so it is your responsibility to ensure that your influence is a positive one.

You can only underestimate the impact which you personally have upon the habits and effectiveness of your group. As the leader of a team, you have the authority to sanction, encourage or restrict most aspects of their working day, and this places you in a position of power - and responsibility. This article looks briefly at your behaviour and at what motivates people, because by understanding these you can adapt yourself and the work environment so that your team and the company are both enriched. Since human psychology is a vast and complex subject, we do not even pretend to explain it. Instead, the article then outlines a simple model of behaviour and a systematic approach to analysing how you can exert your influence to help your team to work.

Behaviour

Consider your behaviour. Consider the effect you would have if every morning after coffee you walked over to Jimmy's desk and told him what he was doing wrong. Would Jimmy feel pleased at your attention? Would he look forward to these little chats and prepare simple questions to clarify aspects of his work? Or would he develop a Pavlovian hatred for coffee and be busy elsewhere whenever you pass by? Of course you would never be so destructive - provided you thought about it. And you must; for many seemingly simple habits can have a huge impact upon your rapport with your team.

Take another example: suppose (as a good supportive manager) you often give public praise for independence and initiative displayed by your team, and suppose (as a busy manager) you respond brusquely to questions and interruptions; think about it, what will happen?

Probably your team will leave you alone. They will not raise problems (you will be left in the dark), they will not question your instructions (ambiguities will remain), they will struggle on bravely (and feel unsupported). Your simple behaviour may result in a quagmire of errors, misdirected activity and utter frustration. So if you do want to hear about problems, tell the team so and react positively when you hear of problems in-time rather than too-late.

Motivation

When thinking about motivation it is important to take the long-term view. What you need is a sustainable approach to maintain enthusiasm and commitment from your team. This is not easy; but it is essential to your effectiveness.

Classic work on motivation was undertaken by F. Herzberg in the 1950's when he formulated the "Motivation-Hygiene" theory. Herzberg identified several factors, such as salary levels, working conditions and company policy, which demotivated (by being poor) rather than motivated (by being good). For example, once a fair level of pay is established, money ceases to be a significant motivator for long term performance. Herzberg called these the "Hygiene" factors to apply the analogy that if the washrooms are kept clean, no one cares if they are scrubbed even harder. The point is that you can not enhance your team's performance through these Hygiene factors - which is fortunate since few team leaders have creative control over company organization or remuneration packages. What you can influence is the local environment and particularly the way in which you interact with your team.

The positive motivators identified by Herzberg are: achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement. These are what your team needs; loads-o-money is nice but not nearly as good as being valued and trusted.

Achievement

As the manager, you set the targets - and in selecting these targets, you have a dramatic effect upon your team's sense of achievement. If you make them too hard, the team will feel failure; if too easy, the team feels little. Ideally, you should provide a series of targets which are easily recognised as stages towards the ultimate completion of the task. Thus progress is punctuated and celebrated with small but marked achievements. If you stretch your staff, they know you know they can meet that challenge.

Recognition

Recognition is about feeling appreciated. It is knowing that what you do is seen and noted, and preferably by the whole team as well as by you, the manager. In opposite terms, if people do something well and then feel it is ignored - they will not bother to do it so well next time (because "no one cares").

The feedback you give your team about their work is fundamental to their motivation. They should know what they do well (be positive), what needs improving (be constructive) and what is expected of them in the future (something to aim at). And while this is common sense, ask yourself how many on your team know these things, right now? Perhaps more importantly, for which of your team could you write these down now (try it)?

Your staff need to know where they stand, and how they are performing against your (reasonable) expectations. You can achieve this through a structured review system, but such systems often become banal formalities with little or no communication. The best time to give feedback is when the event occurs. Since it can impact greatly, the feedback should be honest, simple, and always constructive. If in doubt, follow the simple formula of:

- highlight something good
- point out what needs improving
- suggest how to improve

You must always look for something positive to say, if only to offer some recognition of the effort which has been put into the work. When talking about improvements, be specific: this is what is wrong, this is what I want/need, this is how you should work towards it. Never say anything as unhelpful or uninformative as "do better" or "shape up" - if you cannot be specific and say how, then keep quiet. While your team will soon realize that this IS a formula, they will still enjoy the benefits of the information (and training). You must not stint in praising good work. If you do not acknowledge it, it may not be repeated simply because no one knew you approved.

The work itself

The work itself should be interesting and challenging. Interesting because this makes your staff actually engage their attention; challenging because this maintains the interest and provides a sense of personal achievement when the job is done. But few managers have only interesting, challenging work to distribute: there is always the boring and mundane to be done. This is a management problem for you to solve. You must actually consider how interesting are the tasks you assign and how to deal with the boring ones. Here are two suggestions.

Firstly, make sure that everyone (including yourself) has a share of the interesting and of the dull. This is helped by the fact that what is dull to some might be new and fascinating to others - so match tasks to people, and possibly share the worst tasks around. For instance, taking minutes in meetings is dull on a weekly basis but quite interesting/educational once every six weeks (and also heightens a sense of responsibility). Secondly, if the task is dull perhaps the method can be changed - by the person given the task. This turns dull into challenging, adds responsibility, and might even improve the efficiency of the team.

Responsibility

Of all of Herzberg's positive motivators, responsibility is the most lasting. One reason is that gaining responsibility is itself seen as an advancement which gives rise to a sense of achievement and can also improve the work itself: a multiple motivation! Assigning responsibility is a difficult judgement since if the person is not confident and capable enough, you will be held responsible for the resulting failure. Indeed, delegating responsibility deserves another article in itself (see the article on Delegation).

Advancement

There are two types of advancement: the long-term issues of promotion, salary rises, job prospects; and the short-term issues (which you control) of increased responsibility, the acquisition of new skills, broader experience. Your team members will be looking for the former, you have to provide the latter and convince them that these are necessary (and possibly sufficient) steps for the eventual advancement they seek. As a manager, you must design the work assignment so that each member of the team feels: "I'm learning, I'm getting on".

Problems

We are going to look at a simple system for addressing people-problems. It is a step-by-step procedure which avoids complex psychological models (which few managers can/should handle) and which focuses upon tangible (and so controllable) quantities.

One word of warning: this technique is often referred to as Behavioural Modification (BM) and many balk at the connotations of management-directed mind control. Do not worry. We are simply recognising that staff behaviour IS modified by the work environment and by your influence upon it. The technique is merely a method for analysing that influence to ensure that it is positive and to focus it to best use.

In any group of people there are bound to be problems - as a manager, you have to solve or at least contain them. You ignore them at your peril. Such problems are usually described in terms like: "Alex is just lazy" or "Brenda is a bad-tempered old has-been". On the one hand, such people can poison the working environment; the other hand, these descriptions are totally unhelpful.

The underlying philosophy of BM is that you should concentrate upon specific, tangible actions over which you have influence. For instance "Alex is lazy" should be transformed into "Alex is normally late with his weekly report and achieves less than Alice does in any one week". Thus we have a starting point and something which can be measured. No generalities; only specific, observable behaviour.

Before proceeding, it is worth checking that the problem is real - some "problems" are more appearance than substance, some are not worth your time and effort. So, **Stage 1** is to monitor the identified problem to check that it is real and to seek simple explanations. For instance Alex might still be helping someone with his old job.

Stage 2 is often missed - ask Alex for his solution. This sort of interview can be quite difficult because you run the danger of making personal criticism. Now you may feel that Alex deserves criticism, but does it actually help? Your objective is to get Alex to work well, not to indulge in personal tyranny. If you make it personal, Alex will be defensive. He will either deny the problem, blame someone else, blame the weather, tell you that he knows best or some combination of the above. If, on the other hand, you present the situation in terms of the specific events, you can focus upon Alex's own view of the problem (why is this happening?) and Alex's own solution (what can Alex do about it - can you help?).

Stage 2 will sometimes be sufficient. If Alex had not realised there was a problem, he might act quickly to solve it. If he had thought his behaviour would pass unnoticed, he now knows differently. By giving Alex the responsibility for solving his own problem, you can actually motivate him beyond the specific problem: he may suggest an improved reporting system, or a short training course to deal with a technical short-coming. Finally, the demonstration alone that you are interested in Alex's work may be enough to make him improve. Never assume that you know better, always ask first - then if no solution is forthcoming, proceed to ...

Stage 3 is the analysis stage and is based upon a simple model of behaviour: every action is preceded by a trigger, and is followed by a consequence or payoff. Thus baby is hungry (trigger), baby wails (action), baby gets fed (payoff); or the report is due today (trigger), Alex goes for coffee break "to think about it" (action), Alex has a relaxing afternoon (payoff).

Sometimes, good behaviour is blocked by negative payoffs. For instance, if every time Clive informs his boss Diane about a schedule change (action), Diane vents her annoyance on Clive (payoff), then Clive will be less inclined to approach Diane with information in the future. One of the problems with communication in Ancient Greece was that the bearer of bad news was often executed.

Once you have analysed the problem, **Stage 4** is to find a solution. With most people-problems at work, you will find that the "bad" behaviour is reinforced by a payoff which that person finds attractive. There are two solutions: 1) modify the payoff either by blocking it, or by adding another consequence which is negative, or 2) create a positive payoff for the alternative, desired "good" behaviour. In the long term, the latter is preferable since it is better for motivation to offer encouragement rather than reprimand; optimally you should implement both.

This is where you have to be creative. BM provides a manageable focus and a framework for analysis; you, as manager, must provide the solution. It is best to work on one problem at a time because this simplifies the analysis. Further, by addressing one, other related problems are often affected also. Let us consider "late reporting". Firstly, add a negative consequence to Alex's current behaviour. State explicitly that you need the report by 3.30 on Friday (so that you can prepare your weekly schedule update) - and, if this does not happen, summon Alex at four o'clock to demand the report before he leaves for the weekend. This will probably ruin his "hour before the weekend" and he will wish to avoid it.

Secondly, if Alex does get the report in by 3.30 make a habit of responding to it on Monday morning: if there is an issue raised, help Alex to solve it; if there is a schedule change, talk it over - but make it clear (say it) that you are only able to do this because you had time on Friday to read over his report. Thus Alex learns that he will receive help and support IF he gets the report in on time.

Stage 5 is necessary because such plans do not always work. You must continue to monitor the problem and after a trial period, review your progress. If the plan is working, continue; if the plan has failed, devise a new one; if the plan has worked, look for a new problem to solve.

Where to Seek Solutions

The range of problems is so large, that it is impossible to offer more than generalities as advice. Each person is different, each situation is different, so each solution must be carefully crafted. This being said, here are a few ideas.

Look for aspects of motivation - any problem which stems from lack of commitment or interest can only successfully be addressed by providing motivation, and any of the motivators described earlier can be applied.

Be flexible with regards to personal problems. No parent is immune to the "joys" of a new born baby, no one is unaffected by bereavement. When circumstances and the human factor impinge upon your ordered plans, adapt; since you cannot change it, work with it. Focus upon the problem (say, schedule slippage) and deal with that in the existing situation. For instance if you sanction half a day's "sick-leave" to see a solicitor, you might save a week's worry and distraction.

On a larger scale, look carefully at the "systems" which exist in your team, at those work practices which you and they follow through habit. Some of these can work against you, and the team. For instance, the way you hold team meetings may suppress contributions (at 4 o'clock on a Friday, say); the way you reward the exceptional may demotivate those responsible for the mundane.

Take a long term view. Constant pressure will eventually destroy your team members. If you acknowledge that a relaxed yet engaged workforce is (say) 10% more efficient than one which is over-stressed and fretful, then you should realize that this amounts to half-a-day per week. So why not devote half-a-day to: peer-group teaching, brainstorming on enhanced efficiency, visits to customers (internal and external), guest lectures on work tools, or all four on a four-weekly cycle. You lose nothing if you gain a skilled, committed, enthusiastic team.

Finally, look carefully at how you behave and whether the current situation is due to your previous inattention to the human factor: you might be the problem, and the solution.