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What makes a manager?

By Paperitalo Staff

In the last forty years I have made enough management mistakes to qualify as an expert. As we launch a new year and some of you have set New Year's resolutions to become or advance as managers, it might be appropriate to review some of my misconceptions and errors for your benefit.

1. Don't assume that just because a person graduated from a certain school, they are a trained manager--unless that school happens to be a military academy. Even from the military academies, there is a degree of competence within each class. Particularly be wary of people with a technical education, for there is almost no relationship between a technical education and management, for most really good technical graduates are introverts, not exactly natural management material (at least straight out of school). They can be trained, however, but not by osmosis.
2. A good manager is absolutely ethical and moral to the highest standards, yet they know when to be open about this and when not to be open. For instance, I remember in the sixties when a student at West Point voluntarily told a commanding officer that someone other than himself had polished his shoes. He was discharged. Why? Because he was not self-correcting on his ethical behavior. He could have self-corrected this matter and gone on, the fact that he took ethics to an extremely high level cost him his education, for under fire he may not have been able to discern between high ethics (what is expected) and ethics beyond reason (not expected). This is a tough point, but hopefully you will be able to see the difference. Captain Owen Honors, recently and formerly Commander of the USS Enterprise, is no doubt currently studying this issue.
3. A good manager knows the goals and the boundaries and is always working tirelessly to achieve them. They may become tired, but they never become discouraged, at least for very long. No matter what is going on around them, they keep their eye on the goal and are conscientious of where the edges are. Of course, for you regular readers, you know the ultimate goal in any scenario is to "spin the invoice printer."
4. A good manager keeps their ego in check. One has to have some ego in order to think they can lead others successfully, but too much is a killer. Big egos think they can do no wrong, think they do not have to continuously self assess their capabilities, and think further management training is not necessary. They usually fail in a big way.

5. A good manager knows those they lead do not have the same objectives they do. For instance, some subordinates' objective may be to accrue as much overtime as possible. This is certainly not in line with the organization's goals. Other conflicts often arise.
6. A great manager is an actor and knows when to turn it on and when to turn it off. There are times, with trusted subordinates, when one lets their guard down, but most of the time, great managers act and never, ever show their own emotions.
7. Great managers don't worry about perks, and in fact, eschew the reserved parking space and corner office if possible (in some organizations, this is part of the position and cannot be avoided by middle managers--top managers can and should kill such "decorations").
8. Great managers accept nothing of consequence from suppliers and vendors for their personal use.
9. Great managers go out of their way to be personally in contact with their customers, even if sales is not in their current role.
10. If you have not figured it out by now, being a manager is a tough job involving learned skills and natural ability.

And, it goes without saying, great managers put safety first. If you aspire to greatness and are not doing this, perhaps it is time to reevaluate.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##