Managing Teams, Part II

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In the previous installment of this article, I defined four principles distilled through years of managing and observing teams engaged in product- and service-related efforts.

1. Focus on building a strong team that can solve hard problems and add genuine value for the customer.

2. Leaders inspire; managers enable. To be both a good leader and a good manager, you need to communicate the vision and understand the details.

3. Anticipate obstacles, and eliminate them while they’re small.

4. Take the time to listen to others carefully, but don’t worry TOO much about what other people think.

In this final installment, I’ll add six additional principles that can help you succeed as a team manager.

5. Focus on facts.

For many reasons, we frequently violate this guideline, almost always with disastrous consequences. Deal with reality. Always relate to what is, not to what you would have liked or what could have been or what might be in the future. Stay in the present, and deal with the facts.

Separate facts from opinions. Also separate facts from their consequences.
or implications; often people report these concurrently or confuse them.

When engaged in discussions, evaluations, critiques, and other issues that involve performance, stay focused on the facts as opposed to the personalities of the people involved. Evaluate data based on its factual content, not on the source. Gather facts first and reserve judgment until later.

I have found that writing things down helps me focus on facts. Sometimes this involves making lists, writing things in a standard format, or just creating notes for future reference. When I do this, it becomes very clear when I can legitimately use verbs like "is" and "are" rather than verbs like "appears to be" and "seems to."

6. Provide stability by being an attenuator, not an amplifier.

This is an important attribute.

Most of our information channels are "noisy." Every organization has a rumor mill that is constantly churning out misinformation. As managers and leaders, we need to avoid amplifying the noise so that we don't mask the signal. Rarely is a new situation as good or as bad as it looks at first. Take in the data, absorb it, and then decide on appropriate action. A measured response is almost always best. As crises spike within your organization, remember that "this too shall pass," and be the one who sets an example for the rest of the team. To lead effectively, you must keep your head while those around you are losing theirs. Your job is to dampen the spikes and surges and restore regularity to the daily flow of energy.

Occasionally, you may be forced into acting quickly, or an "unmeasured" response may even be desirable. For example, if someone lures away a key employee with a "Godfather offer," then you need to react quickly if you hope to turn the situation around. Or if your team makes a major breakthrough, you'll want to react with unbridled enthusiasm, no holds barred. You'll recognize these exceptional situations when they crop up.

7. Never attribute to malice what can be explained by incompetence.

If someone says or does something that may affect you in an adverse way, be very careful of jumping to the wrong conclusion; paranoia can get you into a lot of trouble. If the act seems wrongheaded, first assume that it was a mistake. Try to imagine the erroneous set of assumptions that might have led the person to this action. Put yourself in his or her shoes.

Only after eliminating all possible "error scenarios" should you even entertain the notion that impure motives were at work. Why? Consider the consequences. If you assume malice and you are wrong, then you will almost certainly make an enemy -- and enemies have a nasty habit of accumulating. It's silly to make them unnecessarily.
If you incorrectly assume incompetence, on the other hand, then, yes, you may get burned. But you will be burned only once. When you give the perpetrator a chance to reconsider his “mistake,” then he’s sure to expose his true colors. In the long run, you’ll have earned the trust of other team members by treating your enemy with respect.

I also believe that incompetence is far more widespread than evil. This may be a naïve view, but I believe statistics are on my side when I take this approach.

8. Cultivate a sense of humor as a counterweight to intensity: take the job seriously and yourself lightly.

I have sometimes been called an intense person. This quality is both a blessing and a curse.

Intensity is the flame to brilliancy’s spark. It allows you to focus, and it can help transmit a sense of purpose to the rest of the team. The refusal to give up, even in the face of adversity, is important.

But there is a dark side to intensity. It violates the Greek ideal of “everything in moderation”: There's no such thing as "moderately intense." If you're a person who doesn't let go easily, then you need to be careful; don't let large, ongoing doses of your intensity poison your team.

Having a sense of humor helps. Even in times of crisis, you may need to step back enough to recognize the absurdity of it all. Laugh. Make fun of yourself. Recognize your mistakes and be proud of them, even though it hurts. My theory is that you have already paid for the mistake, and getting a laugh out of it at least brings you a little return on your investment.

I'm not talking about gallows humor here, which is scarcely better than no humor at all. I mean a real, robust appreciation for the follies that inevitably go along with working in an organization, trying to create something out of nothing, and being human.

Teams will forgive a lot of transgressions on the part of their managers, but incompetence, sloth, and humorlessness are not among them.

9. Have a life outside of work, and read twenty-five books a year.

Go back and read #8 again.

You cannot lead effectively -- or even survive -- if you don't have something else to think about besides your job. For me, it has been family, physics, golf, and a few other miscellaneous interests. Go out to the movies, see plays, play poker, dance, howl at the moon. Whatever works for you. But remember, alcohol is a depressant.
Hot baths and long walks have also helped me. I've found that you have to do some kind of exercise to stay in shape, even if the only muscle you use during the day is your brain. That's why world champion chess players do rigorous physical training.

If the stress gets really bad, then talk to people outside your project and your company. They can help you gain perspective. If one of them is your boss, be sure to make him your ally.

Regular reading is another activity that's crucial for effectiveness and survival. As we get older, we tend to recycle what has worked in the past instead of learning and trying new approaches. We gain more and more knowledge through experience, and less and less through formal channels. In addition to periodicals, you should set a goal of twenty-five books a year, which comes out to a book every two weeks. They don't all have to be new, and they don't all have to be technical. If travel is a part of your job, reading is an excellent way to use the time you might otherwise waste waiting around in airports or on the plane.

10. Trust your instincts: if it doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't.

It's easy to get overly analytical. Sometimes we run the numbers until we're blue in the face without bothering to examine the underlying assumptions that went into collecting those numbers. Then, we come to a conclusion that doesn't feel right.

What's maddening about these situations is that we're unable to articulate the reasons for our discomfort. Nevertheless, fearing that this perverse situation will paralyze us, we forge ahead with the analysis and then take action, even though it doesn't feel right.

In the vast majority of these cases, I have regretted the decision. Here's my advice: If it really doesn't feel right, then trust your instincts. You didn't accumulate your "gut wisdom" overnight; you are feeling the sum total of all your past experiences when this happens. At the very least, force yourself to try to understand what is causing the discomfort and then address it.

In my case, most of these bad decisions have revolved around hiring. Never hire someone with whom you don't feel comfortable, which is not to say that you should never take a risk. If the risk level is high enough to make you uncomfortable, however, go with your gut, and don't make the offer.

I've always believed that it's better to make a bad decision than to make no decision at all. When your important decisions and your tummy disagree, however, be careful!

Parting Thoughts
If the ten ideas I’ve presented in this two-part article seem like a bit of a grab bag, that’s because they are. Management and leadership are still arts, not sciences; disciplines that attach the word "science" to themselves -- such as computer science, management science, and social science -- are suspect.¹ We learn what works empirically: by trying things, observing success and failure over a large number of attempts, and then trying to discern patterns. These ten ideas have worked for me over an extended period of time, and all I can do is pass them on for your consideration and use. Your results may vary, because it is all in the application. Best of luck!

¹This observation was originally made by Wayne Meretsky, a former developer at Rational.

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