



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

January 2005 – Issue No. 17



Managerially Speaking: So What Have I Learned?

by Marcel Gingras

After working in executive level roles for several years, I decided to start my own management consulting business. During the time I spent in management, I learned that managing and leading people can be fun and in the end, it should be pretty simple. Unfortunately, a lot of people have tried to turn management and leadership into what it was never really meant to be, i.e., the application of complex principles that appear to be recreated with passing generations of management gurus. My view is that management principles should be simple and withstand the passage of time.

In this article, I cover four basic principles I have developed over the years and I have affixed a label to each one of them for ease of communication.

High Deltas are Bad News

I have always been amazed that some people seem to behave very differently depending on circumstances and the people they are dealing with. I have observed several people who appeared to be so nice and accommodating with me, as their leader, and yet I might hear that they were miserable to deal with from the point of view of their subordinates or their peers. Then, I started to refer to such people as having a high differential or high delta factor.

For example, estimate on a scale of one to 10 (10 being the nicest someone can be) how nice John, one of your managers, appears to be when dealing with you as his boss and call this the 'B' factor. Then, measure on the same scale how nice John is when dealing with his subordinates and call this the 'S' factor. Then the delta factor is simply B minus S and the result can be either positive or negative.

Let us assume that John is very nice to his boss and has a B factor of nine and is not so nice to his subordinates and has an S factor of three. Then, John's delta factor would be equal to six.

Likewise, Mary is very difficult to deal with from her boss' perspective and has a B factor of four; however she is very easygoing with her employees and has an S factor of eight. Then, Mary's delta factor is negative-four.

So, as a manager would you prefer to have John or Mary as one of your direct reports? In my view, I don't really want either of them. It is likely that John is 'acting' when he is dealing with me and he is telling me what I want to hear and he may even praise me excessively to feed my ego. John is likely to be a dictator when dealing with his subordinates and expect total obedience from them. In total, this is a pretty bad mix.

What about Mary? Well, Mary may be one of these managers with a 'bunker' mentality. She will fight tooth and nail for her employees, trying to resist changes that may be suggested by her boss and will likely be very popular with her own employees. Mary is likely to go back to her subordinates and tell them how 'they' (senior management) are trying to impose changes on her and how she is fighting for her employees.



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So What Have We Learned?

So, make no mistake, high deltas, whether positive or negative, are not good for your organization. More than likely, you have some in your own organization. The tricky part is to find them!

Rule of three

As I moved up the corporate ladder, I found it more and more difficult to make an accurate assessment of people or situations, simply because of lack of exposure. Some of my direct reports were in a different location and typically they would at least be on a different floor. It was even worse when it came to forming an opinion on people who did not report directly to me, just because of the lack of exposure. Then, the question of how much information is needed to form an opinion becomes critical. Forming quick judgments based on one incident is typically unfair, as I might not understand everything around the issue that came to my attention. Waiting forever to form an opinion and take action is called procrastination. Then, my compromise became the so-called rule of three.

In its simplest form, the rule of three works as follows. The first time I heard something negative about somebody or about one aspect of somebody, I just made a mental note. I would try to disregard the information on the basis that the information provided to me might have been incomplete. The second time I heard something similar, I would really get interested as I felt there was probably a 90 percent chance that the information might be accurate. The third time, this became my new reality and I would take action or push for appropriate action.

This may sound somewhat drastic, however the point is that as a senior person you can't be so quick that you are unfair to people and you can't be so slow that you feel you never have enough information to form an appropriate judgment.

Rewiring Your Subordinates

I have always been amazed that managers feel they may engineer major personality changes to the people reporting to them. My experience is that such changes are very unlikely to happen and if they happen, they happen for short periods of time. Every one of us is wired a certain way, due to genes, culture, family environment and life experience in general. So, how much time should you spend rewiring your subordinates?

I am a strong believer in training, especially in the early stages of people's careers. Training creates awareness and allows people to discover more quickly what might otherwise take years to learn. However, there is a huge difference between training people to do things a certain way and expecting people to have major personality changes.

As an example, I have sat through several succession-planning sessions. This is typically the best forum to observe people dreaming in color regarding what employees need to do to become better managers. Sometimes people would mention that Tom could be a great manager except for the fact that he is a very poor communicator. Then someone would suggest that Tom should take a communication course. Sometimes I would ask 'How old is Tom and how long has he been managing?' People would sometimes push back and ask why my question was relevant. Well, Tom might have been 50 years old and he might have been a manager for 15 years. Essentially, my view was that at 50, Tom was not likely to be rewired and after 15 years as a manager, he should have already figured out how to communicate, assuming that he had the proper attributes to be a good manager. Had Tom been 31 with one year of managerial experience, I would have been much more receptive to give training or coaching a fighting chance to create some major improvement.

People come with their strengths and weaknesses. You don't have to accept all their weaknesses. You still have to try to cause incremental improvement among your subordinates or make a personnel change if their weaknesses are more than you can tolerate. However, I have always had greater success leveraging people's strengths rather than expecting their weaknesses to disappear.

So, how much rewiring do you really think you can create? How much rewiring do you really believe you can create on yourself? Don't expect too much more from others!

Marriage does not (generally) improve your future partner

Before we get into a debate on this topic, read on!

The area I want to cover is recruiting. I must admit I have seen a lot of poor recruiting in my career, including some I have done. Generally,

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disappointing recruiting is the result of one of several factors including poor interview techniques, improper reference checks, the lack of care to help the newcomer fit within the organization, and last but not least, the belief that the person will change somewhat once on board. It is this last point that I wish to address.

Imagine this scenario: Your VP Finance and CFO resigned in July. You started a search immediately with the expectation that you should have someone available within a couple of months. It is summer time and it is difficult to schedule meetings, so now it is late October and year-end is fast approaching! You finally have a short list of three, but the first candidate is much stronger than the other two. Number two might do the job, but you are not sure and you are not keen on number three. You make an offer to number one who decides not to accept it. So, now you decide you should go with

number two, Jane. You do more in-depth reference checks and find out that Jane has a history of being difficult to manage because she has a knack for upsetting people around her. Sound familiar? What do you do? Well, now it is mid-November and year-end is really close.

So, what is the compromise? Often times, the compromise is that you will hire Jane, but you will really coach her to be more accommodating, so that she will stop upsetting people in the future. You probably know it will not happen, but after a while you convince yourself that it will really happen. Jane comes on board and soon she upsets a whole bunch of people and your life is miserable. So, are you really surprised?

As I said earlier, don't expect marriage to substantially improve your future partner! ☐

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Focus on Opportunities rather than Problems

Problem solving has to be taken care of, of course. But problem solving, however necessary, does not produce results. Systematically look at change inside and outside of the organization and ask "how can we exploit this change as an opportunity for our enterprise?" Focus your best people on the opportunities rather than on problems.

Make Meetings Productive

For many of us, more than half of our days are spent in meetings. Even a one-on-one conversation is a meeting. So, how can we most effectively use this time? First, before every meeting decide what kind of meeting it is (decision making, information sharing, information gathering). Then decide what the outcome should be (a documented decision, an assignment, a summation of the input, consent, etc.). While in the meeting, stick to its purpose and stay focused. Finally, and maybe most importantly, after the meeting document and share

the outcome with all key audiences (finally, a good use for e-mail). Make sure assignments, due dates and owners are identified.

Think and say "We" rather than "I"

Organizational effectiveness is dependent upon trust. If we don't trust each other and believe that we are in this together we will fail. As actuaries, we need to be especially careful about making sure the "we" is organization-wide and not "we smart actuaries" versus those "stupid senior executive, sales people, marketers, etc."

Final Thoughts

These eight key practices are not rocket science, but they require significant self-discipline. I challenge you to take these practices to heart, spend an hour this week figuring out how you will apply them to your work, then commit to applying these practices for the next week. I bet you will find yourself to be more effective, productive and satisfied at work, good luck! ☐