

How to be a good manager

PHILIP SCHOFIELD looks at how managers need to have good team leadership and motivation skills, but above all they need to be good at sorting out problems

Most people know in broad terms what a manager is, although usually they cannot define it exactly. But to ask them what managers do is to invite scores of different answers. Today what they are not is “bosses” who just order workers what to do. Rather they are team leaders and work with their team to achieve common objectives.

Not everyone who has “manager” in their job title is a manager. Some people are given the title to make them look more important to a firm’s customers. For example some businesses call every sales person a “sales manager”. On the other hand there are management jobs that do not have “manager” in the job title – such as an orchestral conductor, the leader of a Himalayan climbing expedition, or a commissioned officer in the armed forces.

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The work of managers can be broken down under six main headings. Firstly they set their team’s objectives. Then they must organise, by working out what needs to be done and allocate people to these tasks. Thirdly they must communicate lucidly so that each person understands what they are responsible for. They must also motivate each person in the team to give their willing effort. They must set targets for their team. And finally they must develop the knowledge and skills of the individuals in their team.

That looks a pretty daunting list. But if you look at a simple example it becomes less alarming. Imagine that you plan a long weekend away with several friends



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and they ask you to lead it. Your objectives will be where you go, when, how you get there, what you intend to do when you are there and what type of accommodation you want. You must decide who is responsible for booking travel, accommodation and so on and make it clear who does what. You may need to chase some people to make sure they complete their tasks by the agreed time. You might also have to show someone how to read a timetable, or use a map and compass to navigate across country, or make a youth hostel booking. And you will need to get everyone to agree to the plan and their individual tasks if the trip is to be a success.

Leadership skills

Hard work yes, but not too daunting if you can focus everyone’s energy and

skills to the task in hand. The other thing you must always remember is that you as the leader carry the responsibility, even if other team members let you down.

Team objectives

Everybody in a team must work to the same aims, otherwise there is chaos – these objectives must be set by the manager. This usually involves dealing with other managers in the organisation because most functions depend on one another. For example, a sales manager should not aim to sell more than the production department can make, or the IT manager aim to computerise the firm’s accounts without consulting the managers in the affected departments. The manager should also let his or her own team have their say in case they spot any problems or can suggest better ways

of doing things. Once agreed, the manager lets every team member know what the objectives are, clearly and without ambiguity.

Work organisation

The manager must work out what needs to be done to achieve the objectives, breaking down the work into individual tasks, and selecting people to perform each job. This means allocating the work by matching the skills and experience of individuals to the needs of each particular job. It also means using materials, tools and so on as efficiently and economically as possible.

Communication

A key management skill is the ability to communicate. This is not just “telling” people what to do, however clearly. Managers listen to their team, encourage their ideas and, where practical, adopt these into the plan. They also offer reassurance if members of the team have any worries or concerns. And if a team’s ideas cannot be incorporated in the plan, the manager should explain why, but still let the team know that its contribution was valuable. It is better to persuade than to tell.

Another important element of communication is creating trust. A manager has to be honest or lose the respect of the team. Managers should not

‘A manager has to be honest or lose the respect of the team, managers should not bluff’

bluff. If they do not know something they should say so – and offer to find out. If they promise to do something, they should always do it or explain why they were unable to do it. And if they make a mistake they need the courage to say “I was wrong” and to apologise. Once a manager loses the trust of the team he or she can never successfully lead that team again.

Motivating staff

How a manager communicates is an important part of motivating the team. The things that motivate people at work are that their job offers interest and challenge, that their contribution is recognised, that they have the opportunity to develop their careers – though training, practicing new skills and hopefully through promotion. Contrary to what some people will tell you, all these are more important than more money. Something as simple as a smile and a “well done” can work wonders.

Good managers also inspire their colleagues. They are always optimists in front of their team – however pessimistic



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they are in private. If there are problems, such as a sudden inrush of work, they don’t tell their team to work harder but roll up their own sleeves and get stuck-in. And if someone makes a mistake, good managers don’t say: “You have a problem. What are you going to do about it?” They say: “We have a problem, what shall we do to solve it?”

Setting targets

Having set objectives for the team, and organised the work that needs to be done to achieve them, the manager must monitor progress. This is done by setting targets both for the team and often for individuals within the team. The manager can then measure what is happening against these targets and inform both the team and higher management. This monitoring helps to highlight any problems that may occur before they become serious.

Developing people

Jobs are changing at an exhilarating pace. So skills and knowledge soon get out of date unless they are regularly updated. It

is the manager’s responsibility to ensure that everyone gets appropriate training and experience to remain on top of their job. This may involve identifying people’s training needs and letting the training department do the training, but sometimes the manager must train people. Training and development is not only important to ensure the job is done as well as it can be, but it is also a great motivator of people.

Collective knowledge

From the above it looks as if managers have a lot to do. But some of these tasks – such as setting objectives, work organisation, setting targets and identifying training needs might take only a very few weeks in the year. Managers spend most of their time sorting out problems, communicating with people and especially enthusing their team members.

And good managers never forget that the collective knowledge and experience of their team members is almost always far greater than their own – so they avoid arrogance.