



5 TRAITS OF GREAT MANAGERS

I have been looking forward to writing this article for quite some time. I have worked with some excellent professional managers during my 24 year career. They showed me that while achieving results is the most important part of our role, how you go about the work and who you work with are what make it worthwhile.

The following are five traits I've recognized as key attributes of these successful managers. None of them exhibited them all, but the best exhibited most of them.

1. Focuses on the Output

This is my favorite trait of any manager. A professional of high caliber hired by an excellent manager should know how to perform her job. If not, she will seek guidance to accomplish the goals before her. The best managers give their employees free reign, within reasonable boundaries, to accomplish their objectives. This is well-known in the technical departments at 3M and GOOGLE where engineers are encouraged to use about 20% of their time developing new ideas. This fosters an environment of experimentation and innovation, and most of all helps conquer the fear of failure.

Many well-meaning managers provide the goals but then hamper success by limiting how they are accomplished. This constraint of initiative and innovation leads to stagnated departments, reduced morale, and employee initiative.

Guidance: Provide goals and guidance to your employees, but don't restrict their methodology.

2. Openly Communicates

Information about the company and its customers is a key data point to the best performers of the firm. The status of customer relationships, ongoing sales and marketing efforts, and general information about the health of the firm is necessary for key contributors to provide maximum benefit to their company.

The best managers keep their people informed of the progress and shortfalls in key areas of the firm. I am not just talking about the monthly/quarterly financial results but also the root causes and initiatives affecting these periodic reports. By having information about the big picture, key contributors will take the initiative to improve the situation. The best are capable of making a great impact when given an opportunity.

Guidance: Trust your people with information. If it is confidential, tell them so. The only thing that grows well in the dark is mushrooms.



3. Provides Feedback

This is the main attribute the best managers I know possess. They tell their people what they can improve. This is a requirement for improving the performance of the individual and the department. An individual contributor is many times on an island alone in the sea of a large company. If feedback is only provided once a year at the typical annual performance review, the employee may feel adrift and unsure of his future.

Feedback is also a key factor in succession planning. The feedback causes employees to improve at their job which in turn makes them more valuable to the firm by providing great options for future promotion.

Guidance: Your employees want to improve their performance so they can improve their status. Tell them where they need to improve. It is sometimes uncomfortable, but is good for them and for the company.

4. Provides Coaching

Coaching is distinct from feedback. Feedback is a corrective measure, while coaching is about improving specific behaviors and skills. Teaching and guiding takes patience on the part of the manager and a willingness to get to know their employee at a deeper level. It also requires the manager to invest time and resources in the growth and improvement of their direct reports.

Like feedback, coaching is also a key factor in succession planning. Coaching improves employee performance which in turn makes them more valuable in both their current role and in the future following promotions.

Guidance: Make sure your team has the skills and behaviors needed to be successful. The benefits of a well designed program will and motivated employees will outweigh the cost.

5. Is Pleasant

Robert Heilein, one of the greatest science fiction writers of the 20th century said it best, "Manners are the grease that lubricates society." The great managers know that good manners and polite society go hand-in-hand with being a professional. They refrain from public outbursts of emotion and conduct small talk and in-depth business conversations with equal ease. The common, more plebeian description is that they are "nice" to work with.



Guidance: It's OK to be tough and demanding of excellence, but be professional and be kind at the same time.

Conclusion

Great managers are rare but they provide great value to the companies they work for. This value comes in the form of enthusiastic and self-motivated employees who create great things, processes, services, experiences, etc. The best part of these great managers is that their skills and traits are transferrable to other managers. A program of skills training and mentoring can help your great managers create other great managers.

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