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Improving Managerial Skills

THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE who are content to live in day-dreams. They drift along waiting for friends or the government or circumstances to promote them into better jobs. They may have fitful yearnings toward advancement but they are not willing to do the preliminary work and pay the price.

Such persons are not of managerial stature. They remind us of the young man in Sloan Wilson's book *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* who announced: "I don't think I'm the kind of guy who should try to be a big executive . . . I don't think I have the willingness to make the sacrifices. I don't want to give up the time."

Every business knows that in good management lies the difference between success and failure. Administering a staff, a factory or an office is a difficult and complicated job. To find managers who are capable now and will improve their capabilities to meet new requirements is one of the serious problems in industry. The Economic Council of Canada published a report in April last year saying that the demand for managerial and professional recruits is expected to grow at more than twice the pace of the entire labour force.

The title "Manager" is not like a medal, awarded in recognition of past services: it is a new appointment to new work with new expectations. It demands continually increasing skills, whether it be management of a business, a school, a hospital, a church, an association or a home.

The word skill is ordinarily applied to the understanding and control of a mechanical process or dexterity in the manual shaping of a physical substance like wood, iron or clay, but it can also apply to the mental activity used in directing those who work with their hands. Improvement in a supervisor's skills must necessarily result in more effective performance by the people he directs.

The key word is "improve". It is a primary obligation of a manager to improve: to improve the work of the people he supervises; to improve the product; to improve the team-work that makes the business effective; to improve the individual work that makes

the product the best in its line; to improve himself so that he is always leading from the front.

Obviously, the person who thinks at any point in his career that he knows it all is at a dead end, a most melancholy place to be.

Management is . . .

Management is the guiding of work in a firm, a department, a home, or any other enterprise, to a predetermined end. Any group of people trying to do something needs a leader. There was once a Russian symphony orchestra that tried to perform without a conductor, but the experiment expired at the first concert.

One of the "Management Capsules" of the United States Treasury Department has this to say: "Three usual types of personnel are: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who don't know what happened. The manager of situations knows what is happening — and he is also making things happen."

Management at every level has a continuing responsibility to improve the organization of the work under its supervision. It is accountable for the successful outcome of the team effort.

Whether your management is of a branch, a product line, a factory, an office, or an advertising agency, there are factors common to all these positions. You must plan and marshal affairs, initiate action and get things done, keep the organization working purposefully and harmoniously. Skill in all these can be excitingly improved so that you become a master strategist with people and a proficient tactician in organization.

The fullest use is not yet being made of the technology available to managers and workers in business and industry. The new techniques must get out of the catalogue into use: they have to be applied. Skill in operating the systems is a major need in a manager.

What skills do you wish to improve? Some persons might say that depends upon the special techniques

of the line of business you are in — engineering, wholesaling, retailing, banking, transportation, and so forth. That is not true in this particular sense of skill. What you wish to improve is *skill in management*.

While the application of management skill will differ in various employments, the skill itself is different from skill with machines, account-keeping and commodity handling. It is a thing in itself.

To become skilled

Willingness to learn is a valuable virtue in a manager. You need to determine what is appropriate to your need. Have a positive, particular aim. It is not enough merely to want to improve. That reminds us of the unsuccessful hunter who said he did not aim at any particular part of the game he hunted, but at it generally.

If you came up through the factory, where you were wholly occupied with technical functions, you probably need to study economics, the special qualities of management, the place of your firm in the corporate galaxy, budgetary control, communication, marketing principles and sales development. You need such knowledge not only so that you can operate your department with efficiency — and of course that is important — but so that you can discuss business intelligently with others in the management group.

Every advancement in managerial rank brings you closer to the large problems of the business, so that you need to develop new skills for every new level of responsibility. Upon being appointed to a post in medium-responsibility management, you should at once start studying to prepare yourself for the policy-making level.

When you have made a syllabus of the skills you wish to improve, the next thing is to get going. Men and women managers are attending courses to update their knowledge and improve their skills. Not all can leave their jobs for long periods, but universities are providing evening courses and mini-courses of three days or a week.

If a formal course is not available, all is not lost. There remains individual study, and many a person has pulled himself up by his books. The person who blames his non-development on the unavailability or costliness of courses is excusing himself for his doing nothing. He is signalling that he should not be a manager.

Experience is valuable, but superiority in management demands more. A man may become a skilled mechanic through working at a bench, but a manager who is content to learn by experience is on slippery ground. It is wise to draw upon experience to avoid making mistakes, but the manager must not let experience hobble him so that he never looks beyond what has happened before.

No two situations are ever exactly the same. Many features may be similar, but one new feature can turn the situation into a wholly new problem to which

there will be a wholly new answer. In arriving at this answer experience should be wedded to the results of knowledge acquired through study.

A manager is . . .

The first requirement of a manager is that he learn to manage his job. If a person lacks required knowledge, and skill in applying it, a title plate on his door will not make him a manager.

Some qualities are natural, while others are skills to be developed. Professor William Gormbley, director of Harvard's Advanced Management Programme, is quoted in Vance Packard's *The Pyramid Climbers* as finding these qualities in executives: they are bright men; they know how to get along with people; they have drive; they are men who have goals; they make the best of what they get; they are not content to sit still.

Being a manager requires mental, moral and physical strength. He must be careful, progressive, persevering and sagacious. He needs to be known for his dependability, reliability and loyalty. He is interested in knowing what is going on, so that he keeps up with developments. He has a philosophy: he knows the answer to "what do I wish to accomplish?" and he is working doggedly on his plan to reach his goal.

The manager is a significant individual. He has ceased to be judged by the low eminences that formerly surrounded him. New standards have been set for him. He has to show stature on a new plane. He has widening relationships with employees, employers, stockholders, the community, the public and government.

No one can call himself a manager if all he does is keep people in order and keep work moving. That is a very low ceiling. His worth to his organization includes his capacity to understand all kinds of people, both equals and subordinates. His agreeable personal tone and manner, the variety and discrimination of his tastes and interests, the wide scope of his knowledge and the breadth of his viewpoint: these are basic qualities in his equipment. Their cultivation is necessary if he is to direct workers in the economic use of material and energy.

The manager's chief need, given technical skill to handle the mechanics of his particular business, is to understand people. Some are born with this quality, others acquire it: the manager must have it either by inheritance or by study and practice.

Being a manager will at times tax your resources of diplomacy. It is not sufficient to see something clearly: you have to convince other people, and this can be an exhausting process. If you must be aggressive, use tact. If you are right and others are wrong, use delicacy in telling them. Skill in negotiating includes knowing when to stop. It is injurious to exceed what is necessary, because it imperils the chance of victory.

A new starting point

It is sometimes difficult for a person upon reaching managerial rank to realize that the promotion has put him at a new starting point. It is true that his promotion acknowledges his demonstrated competence, but he cannot rest on this. There are new psychological problems associated with his getting along with new associates and superiors. He needs to guard against the occupational tendency to become so enamoured of his own department as to neglect the rest of the organization. He must cultivate goodwill of both subordinates and superiors if his firm is to benefit by full and complete team-work.

The prevailing proneness of people to go along in accustomed ways gives the aspiring manager a chance to show his creative capacity. This does not mean that he must stir things up and change systems and upset people to demonstrate that he is alive and hustling. A bull in a china shop will be sure to move things around, but not constructively. The manager must, as one executive put it, learn how to disturb the equilibrium without upsetting the apple-cart.

Show skill in tackling old problems, or those you inherited with the job, with energy and a fresh viewpoint. Seek help, accept help, and give help generously. Do not despise specialists. They have skills to which you need not aspire, but make sure that you understand the significance of what they tell you. You can use new techniques to develop efficiency and profitability without getting lost in methodology.

If there are any imperatives valid for all managers they are (1) be aware of what is going on, and (2) be ready for action. The manager is a manager of situations. No emergency should catch him without resources. Experience, study, observation, and thought have familiarized him with the conditions, so that he recognizes the needs of the situation and knows what should be done.

A manager must not conclude prematurely that a line of obstacles is so formidable that it cannot be overcome. A crisis gives a man a chance to show what he is made of. Welcoming difficulty eliminates the fatal-to-personal-success excuse of the man who blames some outside influence for a lag in productivity or a slump in marketing.

There will occur occasions when a manager will have to be willing to make a wise alliance with circumstances and submit with good grace to a course of events he cannot help. What is needed is skill in avoiding a too-ready surrender.

Managerial individuality

What a manager is in himself may be of more importance than his technical knowledge of his business. Bishop Phillips Brooks explained the greatness of Martin Luther in this way: "Some men are events. It is not what they say or what they do, but what they are, that moves the world." They have individuality.

The manager whose life is bounded by rules is not making the most of himself: he needs principles to guide him. The realist author Stephen Crane wrote that a rule supports us by the armpits over life's mountain passes, while a principle makes us sure-footed. Principles are for leaders who do their own thinking; rules are for people who just wish to obey.

Doing something "by the book" is not always the most satisfactory way. The manager is expected to originate, visualize, organize, energize and supervise.

This demands individual intelligent work, a quality that can be improved by any manager inspired by the lofty aim to build his own prestige on demonstrated mental capacity, matured intellectual power, and achievement of purposes.

Good management involves the reality of making decisions, a bugbear to persons who have not qualified themselves to cope. Here is a skill that can be cultivated by practice. It involves the facility to assimilate facts, integrate them, evaluate the resulting data, take alternatives into account, and produce a valid decision.

One vital knack is to recognize when there are enough facts to justify making a decision. It is not always the essence of good management to wait for all the desirable data. But, as is usual with all maxims, there is an exception: refuse to be hurried when sense or instinct warns that deliberation is needed.

The measure of skillfulness is effective action under whatever circumstances prevail. Nobody is specially interested in how hard a manager has worked, but in what he has produced. He will learn to make every act net the greatest possible results. He will, like the playwright, endeavour to draw everything neatly into a satisfying last act and a final scene.

Self-development

Even though a manager seeking to upgrade his worth attends a course in management skills, much of the improvement he makes will be the result of his personal effort. The self-development of a manager is far and away his most important effort directed toward enhancing his competency on his job and his personal contentment in his work.

No aspiring manager can sit back, wrapped in narrow interests, and wait for favourable opportunities and helpful people to come to him. He needs to stir up a free-flowing exchange of ideas from all possible sources. He must be continually aware of the shifting relative importance of operations and departments, of finance and markets. He should study systems management in both office and plant.

To keep in touch with the changing scene, the manager will find it profitable to belong to a group of people in the same line of business or the same occupation. This will give him a chance to see how his opposite numbers in other firms are doing their jobs. He should broaden his knowledge about political,

social and economic affairs in Canada and what is going on elsewhere.

Ayn Rand makes this need clear in *The Romantic Manifesto* (Signet, 1971). "To improve anything one must know what constitutes an improvement — and to know that, one must know what is the good and how to achieve it — and to know that, one must have a whole system of value-judgments." How are these values to be selected except by gaining knowledge and tuning in on people?

To grow in management skill requires a great deal of thought, and business is looking for men who can think effectively. Expert men may do jobs, but the general counselling and the marshalling of affairs come from men who can use intelligently what they have learned.

A manager cannot become engrossed in routine operations, leaving him only odd minutes for planning squeezed in between engagements and distractions. The computer has introduced a new high standard of accuracy and speed in the handling of quantitative problems. Management must keep up with it by sharpening its ability to make qualitative judgments.

This sharpens the realization that a manager needs to broaden his intellectual outlook. Educated people with ideas are necessary. Wide general acquaintance with the humanities may not give a man the technical qualifications to put across a big deal, but it will prepare him to grasp the essentials of the human situation, and all deals, big or little, resolve themselves into dealing with human beings.

Look at tomorrow

Not many firms have clairvoyants on their payrolls, but every manager needs some of the skill a clairvoyant shows. He can use his own sort of crystal ball.

Sit down for ten minutes before quitting time with nothing on your desk but a pad of paper and a pencil. Look at tomorrow and make notes. What is to be started? finished? repaired? Where could a bottleneck develop? What slack time will there be into which you can fit odd items? Is there a peak load period that you can level off?

You are not a manager for today only, so you must spare a glance at what is coming up tomorrow. Are today's growth plans for your department adequate? Will the new system you plan to introduce meet the needs of that growth plan five years hence, or will it have to be scrapped for something new?

Look back over the progress the company has made in the past five or ten years, paying attention to forks in the road where a different direction might have been taken. Sniff the air: is the wind blowing your way? is there a whiff of increased competition? are there economic clouds on the national or world horizon?

From this hindsight and wind-sniffing, as Vance Packard wrote in *The Pyramid Climbers*, you will

discern where your company or your department can be or should be tomorrow.

You can upgrade your other skills by cultivating poise. A person who is stable emotionally gives evidence of it by being patient, tolerant, fair, open-minded, and understanding of the problems of others. Here is a skill to develop, replacing fretful stir.

Objectives and planning

Clarify, in writing, the end results you desire as an outcome of your effort to increase your skills. Determine what activities leading to those objectives are immediate and list the others in order of priority. If you improve your skill in grasping the whole situation and organizing your activity you have taken a big step forward.

Extend this gradually so as to embrace the objectives of your firm. Then you can place yourself in position to participate in the best possible way in the activity involved in reaching them. When you are well acquainted with your company's objectives, policies, plans and budgets you can dovetail your personal skills so as to make a maximum contribution.

Some persons shy away from the word "plan". It does include a lot of work, but it is a necessary part of any endeavour that is to be successful. Things have to be designed and blue-printed before anyone can make them.

Planning is not, as is too often thought, forecasting. It does not use a horoscope to foretell outcomes, but a pick and shovel to lay foundations.

When the plans are completed, the manager will add in their execution his energy of mind, improvisation to fill in gaps, and a touch of the genius that makes him managerial material.

Personal satisfaction

There is an important fact not to be forgotten in planning to improve your managerial skills. Significant individual life does not consist solely in reaching business goals. A person must stand for something within himself if he is to add meaning to his life. Here is the touchstone of a person's mind and spirit: does his effort to advance contribute to the quality of his thoughts and the worthiness of the image he has created for himself?

The final accounting of your worth as a manager looks at the quality of your leadership, not at test ratings or status symbols. Being a manager, like being a king or a president, is essentially of the nature of a service. To be successful in leadership service one must design the job, structure it, texture it, shape it with conscious purpose, and inspire his workers to carry it through to completion.

There is very little coasting in successful business. There is no neutral gear. The manager may not advance in great leaps and bounds, but he has to keep inching along. He needs to accept on account what he attains, and then pursue the rest.