

absolutely business



Practical People Management Basic tools for extraordinary results

By Denise Walker FREC

Part 4: The balancing act

In this series of articles, Denise Walker shares her management experience, ideas and methods that actually work from a practitioner's perspective rather than HR theory.

Imagine this: you are a new manager in the first day of your first management job and you are just about to meet up with your team of inherited staff for a first briefing. Usually confident, you have earned the reputation as a high performer, having achieved top sales results over the past year. You have well and truly earned this promotion. And you are more nervous than you can remember ever being before; your mouth is dry, you doubt yourself 100% and you can't for the life of you remember why you wanted this job in the first place! They are waiting for you on the other side of the door. You take a deep breath and walk into the room: Act 1, Scene 1...

Yes, it can be like being on stage – and, just as successful actors prepare, practise, learn their lines and know their role inside out, successful managers know exactly what their roles are. And this starts with knowing what their jobs entail in the first place. In essence, as John Adair's simple model sums up perfectly (www.johnadair.co.uk), the focus is on 3 key areas:

- TASK: Achieving the TASK
- TEAM: Building and maintaining the TEAM
- INDIVIDUALS: Motivating and developing INDIVIDUALS

Whilst no two management roles will be exactly the same, there are some universal elements to managing. Working to this model is, in my experience, the most practical method of achieving great results through a team of people, whatever the size of the business. I have worked with some very effective managers, who, through balancing these 3 areas, whilst adapting focus between each (according to the needs of the organisation), obtain quality results for the business, build great staff morale and develop their teams.

1. Tasks

In the first of this series of articles, we covered the subject of leadership, including vision and planning. Using this as a starting point, effective managers plan to get the basics right, such as tools, stock, equipment and facilities, so that there are no obstacles to achieving task objectives. And they also establish responsibilities and standards, so that people know who is expected to do which tasks and when and so that quality is maintained against agreed performance indicators.

This may be common sense but you'd be amazed at the type of issues that surface when tasks are not managed properly; I once worked with a client, who relied on customers being able to deliver A4-sized documents to his office and his team to be able to process them within a certain timeframe. In a meeting, he was berating the fact that his staff regularly mislaid these documents and, as a result, missed the company's deadlines for dealing with them. It was only when we noticed that the front door had a very small letterbox, that we investigated further and found that the issue was caused when customers delivered out of hours; they tended to leave their precious documents either in the entrance to the building or with neighbouring businesses (which had larger letterboxes!). Once recognised, that particular obstacle was soon overcome with a spanking new – large - letterbox.

Another example is when interviewing tools for one particular recruitment consultancy (registration forms, welcome packs, and reference request pro-formas) were altered to include prompts for questions that consultants often forgot to ask. Hey presto, no more forgotten questions.

Once the plan is in place, it is essential to monitor performance against it and to regularly review it in a meaningful way. Successful managers give themselves a chance to work ON the business, rather than just IN it by stepping outside of the day to day activities on a regular basis for some strategic planning. This helps them to recognise resource deficiencies by looking at their operations from the outside in, helping them to highlight all obstacles and then working out how to overcome them. It is amazing how many creative ideas come to light and are then put into practice in this way.

2. Teams

Team management is all about getting team-building systems, processes and standards into place. For example, establishing standards of team performance and behaviour, the style of the business, discipline, ethics and integrity. It also requires managers to set team objectives. This is important, because team goals gel people together, enhance the overall performance and encourage self-support and mutual learning experiences – something that is not easily achieved through setting individual objectives alone. And of course, there is a need to give feedback on the overall progress of the group.

One of my favourite illustrations of this is a small recruitment business, whose owner/director recognised that the team element had been missing from the working environment for a long time; she realised that, by introducing a few team elements into the business, this might enhance individuals' potential. As a small business, she wanted to avoid "micro management" at all costs, so she introduced a few simple key elements to team management, which included: delegation of team-related roles; a weekly team catch up meeting (lasting no more than half an hour) and a team target. Within 2 months, morale and productivity had improved and the manager was delighted to find that she had more time on her hands, because the team were a lot more self-sufficient. Simple, easy to implement and effective.

3. Individuals

Just as good recruiters know that understanding clients, candidates and jobs inside out is the key to great recruitment results, good managers know that understanding individual staff inside out is key to great people management. They make it their business to know their staff's personalities, skills, strengths, needs, aims and fears. I am often asked this: "When inheriting a team or recruiting new staff, how do you know this of them, when you have not worked with them before?" My answer to this is: "Ask them." Mind-reading helps but it's a lot easier this way! When managers first start to work with new teams asking saves guesswork and time, although they will get to know their staff better the longer they work with them.

Clearly, a manager should be there to assist and support the team and it helps to have individuals working to agreed objectives and to give recognition and praise, when it is due. This can be achieved through an effective appraisal process but can also be done informally, where appropriate. And don't be afraid to lose staff through doing the right thing and developing them to their full potential; some managers mistakenly try to keep people with them despite the obvious fact that they are ready to be promoted, a sure fire way to lose them to competitors. Successful managers develop their staff and often produce top performers, who move onto more senior roles within the same company – to the immense benefit to the overall prosperity of the business.

And my final point on this subject is this: **example-setting** is an absolute must when it comes to maximising management potential. If you work to high standards, “walk the walk” and generally manage yourself well, you will be the best possible role model for your people. What more could a team ask of their manager!

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About Denise Walker FREC

Denise Walker owns and runs Absolutely Business, a specialist management consultancy, delivering **business consultancy**, **training** and **training services**, designed to help business owners maximise turnover, profits and staff effectiveness.

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