

SURPRISED MANAGERS

PART TWO



Establishing the Environment

Let us take presentation skills as an example. In any managerial position, a manager must give both formal and informal presentations of information and ideas to both his or her staff and for senior management. The training officer's role is to cause the manager to focus upon the effectiveness of these presentations and to provide material by which the manager can improve. One single idea, is to provide a feedback form by which the audience express their opinion. Based upon this, the manager can be asked to designate one area which merits improvement and the training officer can provide the suggestions for literature to address this specific point. If this simple procedure is habituated throughout the company, it is immediately obvious to any surprised manager that presentation skills are important and part of the training which is expected. The feedback proformer is just one example of how presentation skills can be implemented within the company's work place. The task for the training officer is to find many and varied methods for raising the issue of the skills. For instance, IBM have a programme of guest speakers whereby senior managers offer presentations to external institutions such as universities and schools: the feedback from these presentations actually affect a manager's performance appraisal.

Such formal procedures, however, can quickly become stale and lose their effectiveness. The challenge of the training officer is to obtain the momentum and enthusiasm of the managers for their own skill development. One simple idea would be to designate the skill of the month. This requires a large notice board and a big sign. Each month a new skill is pasted onto the notice board and the activity of the training department is focused upon the promotion of that skill. There could be a monthly training newsletter with a future article of tips for the evaluation and enhancement of a skill. There could be a short series of talks at the beginning of the month, possibly from "external experts", on the theory behind the skill. The training department may produce a suggested method by which the surprised manager can monitor the skill. At the end of the month, the training officer can pull together the experiences

of each individual manager in developing that skill.

Providing Support

For managers to develop skills, they will need access to suggestions. In the short term this can come simply from providing access to short management guides. There are several series of these available from book stores or the training department may wish to provide their own. In the long term, however, it is far better for these guides to be written by the managers themselves. This works on two levels. First, people respond more readily to the advice of people they know and respect, and especially from people whom they know are facing the same problems as themselves rather than from some freelance writer. Second, the production of this literature provides an excellent focus for each manager's activity. So, at the end of each month, every surprised manager should produce a short (500-800 word) handy hint for that skills development. The training department can then collate the best ideas and publish the managers' booklet. Next month, the next skill; and next year the focus can return anew.

Support can also be offered in terms of one-to-one counselling. This will be particularly important for skills less easy to explain, such as team work for people management. For these, the training department could organise an appointment for each manager with an "expert" either from personnel or from outside the company. For this session, each manager would prepare a case study of the most pressing problem from within his/her team. The case study would then be the outcome of the manager's review of the entire team's personal needs; and it would contain the manager's own analysis of the problem, options for solution, and recommendations. The interviewer must achieve two objectives: first, to review the case study and so to act as tutor for the managers skill development; second, to ensure that the selected plan for addressing the person problem has with it an appropriate system for monitoring and hence for determining success. Notice that these interviews provide an opportunity to review the delegated task (of the managers skill development) without detracting from the manager's authority in either that or the personnel issue.

Establish Criteria for Success

Success is a movable goal. In skill development, success can normally be equated either with improvement in one particular aspect, or with achieving a level of competence over a larger field. The training officer must help the manager to establish small individual goals in skill development - and then to track these goals. In this, the training officer acts not as the stick to beat the manager forward, but rather as the source of the carrot. Since the manager has been delegated the training, the compulsion to progress must come from the manager him/herself; however, it would be a lonely journey if no one else could celebrate the successes - and the training officer should be ready to do just that.

The key is to extend the goals gradually. If someone is presented with a goal which is daunting, one with which he/she does not feel able to cope, then the goal will not be achieved and he/she will be severely demotivated. Instead the skill should build up gradually; first a small goal leading to a little development, then another small goal which builds upon the first; when that is achieved, add another stage; and so on. This is the difference between asking people to scale a sheer wall and providing them with a staircase: by staggering the development you allow them to climb with confidence. Each goal should have enough complexity to stretch the manager staff - but only a little, and there should always be support and recognition available.

Remember too that the "best" is often the enemy of the "good". Many surprised managers need only to be effective in their management skills, not expert. If the training puts too much focus on any one skill, the rest may suffer. The aim is to be good over the broad range of managerial skills, not to be the best at any one.

Conclusion

Becoming a great manager is easy because it is only common sense. Once the questions are thought through, common sense will support the manager's needs. Becoming a great manager is hard because it is only common sense. The manager actually has to apply the ideas in practice rather than merely to acknowledge that they are good. The challenge for the training officer is to motivate the practice, and to support the manager's own search for answers.