

management

dropped in at the deep end?

page twenty

SURPRISED MANAGERS PART ONE

One of the major problems in devising management training courses is in helping the participants to apply what they have learnt when they return to the work place. While it is easy to apply skills within the contrived situations of case studies and role play, it is far harder for a manager to recognise the problems (or to find the time) in the familiar routines of daily work. The key to effective training is to make that training part of the daily routine rather than merely the activity of an isolated workshop, and this can only be achieved by delegating that training to the manager. To achieve this, the focus of the training activity must be altered. Essentially a cultural shift has to occur so that the training officer is seen as the source of suggestions and the coordinator of activity: you no longer provide training, but rather you support the manager's own self-sustaining development.

Becoming a Manager

Most organisations are full of surprised managers. These are the people who are suddenly promoted because they were good at what they did, and given responsibility for projects and people which they do not understand. With surprised managers there are two major problems: they do not actually think about management issues because they do not recognize them, and they have only a limited experience upon which to draw to create solutions.

Put simply, things normally go wrong not because the new managers are stupid but only because they have never thought about managing before. The way forward is to raise the issues, to provide suggestions and, more importantly, to get the managers to evaluate solutions in the context of their own work. Ultimately, they are the ones who will have to cope in the real situations and once they have recognized that the problems exist, they will be able to apply their own common sense.

Management is a skill - and like any other skill

it comes with experience and practice.

If you think that is not true, ask the better athletes or musicians how long they practise in a day. The experience, however, will be made far more effective in developing that skill if managers prepare for the experience and then deliberately exploit it. Thus tennis players do not simply play tennis, they determine their own strengths, they work to overcome their weaknesses, they think carefully about what they do and how to improve, and they listen to what the trainer suggests.

When master craftsmen took on an apprentice, they did not simply point to the materials and say: 'Get on with it'; they showed the apprentice the skills in simple steps and then said: 'Practise'. Yet a common experience at work is that new managers are expected to absorb their skills from thin air, by some magical form of osmosis. There is the irrational belief that people will develop management skills simply by being called names like: manager, supervisor, project leader. One day they are a gofer, the next they have gofers to go for them; yet the newly-appointed manager often has no initial ideas. They 'feel their way', 'jump-in at the deep end', 'go where many have gone before - without bothering anyone else', and the results are not surprising.

There is a theory (known as the Peter Principle) that people rise to the level of their own incompetence, in that they get promoted until they no longer do the job well - and then stay there, performing badly for the rest of their working lives. This is probably true because most organizations actually ignore the difference between the technical competence by which the lower levels impress their superiors and the managerial skills which are needed in the higher levels. This problem can only be addressed by training - but that training can best be obtained by using the talents of the managers themselves

through effective delegation of the training task.

Let us summarize: management is about pausing to ask the right questions so that common sense can provide the answers. By thinking explicitly about management skills, by deliberately practising and striving to improve, by learning from the experience and suggestions of previous managers, the surprised managers can develop their own common-sense approach to management practice. The training department has to promote the environment where this happens naturally.

The Basic Skills

The surprised manager needs to know what is expected. It must be clear what skills are considered (and rewarded) by the company to be important in its managers. If we are considering a manager with responsibility of small teams and small projects, then the skill set might be cast as:

- Organization (Time Management, Quality, Project Planning)
- Communication (Presentation, Writing, Conversation)
- Leadership (Team Work, Delegation, People)

These are nine topics, nine issues, nine skills which the training officer must bring to the attention of each of the surprised managers.

Organization is about providing a plan and a structure to help the manager and the team to get the job done. By providing a structure to the activity, the manager can support and encourage the team since they will know where they are, and what they should do. It allows the manager to pace, and so to stretch, the amount of work - and to select the work to bring the greatest overall efficiency. Thus organization is concerned

with the work, the manager's own time, and the team's time; and every manager must be prepared to spend time to save time for the team. Even if all the time is spent organizing others, far more may be achieved than without that organization. This is not simply a question of allocating tasks. The important point is that the tasks should be structured and allocated so that they match the ability, experience and development needs of each person to whom they are given. Thus the work itself becomes the route to staff motivation and development.

Communication is the most important skill of management since the implementation of all others depends upon it. A manager has to be able to communicate through writing, formal presentations, interviews, specifications and simply in day-to-day conversation - and that communication has to be error free, or time and effort will be wasted. Not only must the information be clear, it must be understood; and what a manager understands from others, must be what was meant.

Leadership is a very nebulous concept. In the last analysis it is about getting people to work with total commitment; it is getting them to follow the manager. The approach which most modern gurus advocate for leadership is through building the work group into a team so that all their talents are working together and with the manager. The theory goes as follows:

- Whipped galley slaves are not nearly as effective as dedicated warriors.
- The team has qualities and abilities which they want, and indeed expect, to use - the manager must ensure that these talents are cultivated or they will be lost.
- What the manager knows is limited; what the team knows is far greater; only by involving the team in the decision making will that greater knowledge be used.

In next months On Target we will continue this article and look at Establishing the Environment, Providing Support and Establishing Criteria for Success.

For any comments on this or any other article or feature in this edition of on target magazine please email the team on: articles@ontargetmag.com

" Most organisations are full of surprised managers. These are the people who are suddenly promoted because they were good at what they did, and given responsibility for projects and people which they do not understand. "

