

Welcome to the November 2003 issue of **Management Shorts**
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I. INTRO: Doing Your Best Work

What allows you to do your best work? Is it pure chance or can the circumstances be replicated? I recently attended a Stanford Business School Executive Program where a lively discussion among a group of senior executives produced some surprising answers.

Use a Real Experience

This issue of Management Shorts will be most valuable to you if you take a few moments right now to think of a time in your professional life when you were doing really great work – stretching yourself, using all of your capabilities, and producing results.

Don't keep reading. Stop and really picture it. Remember the details. What was the situation? What did you do? What did others do? What did it feel like?

Grab a colleague and tell him or her the story. Ask them to share a story as well. Get into that place where you both feel really great – you can do anything you set your mind to.

Have you done it?

Okay, now you can read on.

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Key Factors

It should be obvious that I don't think doing your best work is an accident. Stories from high performers usually include the following factors:

- A. They were working on an **important, crucial task** – something that would make a difference in the business
- B. They had very **clear objectives** (although the pathway to those objectives was ambiguous)
- C. They were given **autonomy** to do the task
- D. They felt personally **accountable** for the task
- E. In most cases they worked with a **strong team**

What is most striking to me is that in most stories there is little or no mention of **the boss**. Where was he or she? What role did they play in making great performance possible?

Lets start with looking at a **spectrum of boss behavior**:

- 1. **No Boss** (in fact or in practice)
- 2. **Benign Neglect** (available for help if called on)
- 3. **Hands-Off Coach** (periodically offers input)
- 4. **Peer**
- 5. **Traditional Manager** (plans, coordinates and reviews on a regular basis and makes major decisions)
- 6. **Control Freak**

In most stories the boss fits into one of the first 2 categories. Does this match your experience? Is it a surprise? Are you surprised that autonomy is motivating for capable people? (**You** are capable, right?)

Okay, by now it should be dawning on you that this article is not about how **you** can be a high performer. **Its about the role you play as a boss in setting the right conditions for your direct reports to be high performers.** As a manager your most important job is to hire good people and then support them so they ca be effective and productive. (Remember the “Theory Z” philosophy of management?)

Lets talk about what you can do to support high performance in your group.

III. GETTING STARTED: What You Can Do

What the Boss Can Do . . .

Providing more autonomy is not about complete abdication. There is much that the boss can do that can be supportive without exerting the kind of control that kills motivation, such as:

- Provide “air cover”

- Remove obstacles
- Give access to decision makers
- Push the employee with good questions
- Give credit outside the project
- Get resources
- Encourage
- Communicate confidence in employee's capabilities
- Give visibility in the organization
- Give autonomy to carry things out

So, there is plenty for you to do. No need to worry that you'll be seen as irrelevant.

. . . And Why the Boss Doesn't Do It

When I did this exercise with a client his response was, "Well, I'm a hands-off type of boss . . . except when I'm not." Hmmm.

Well, sure, this isn't about abdication and there is a role for the traditional manager. Certainly for inexperienced employees a more active approach makes sense. But too often that is an excuse.

As my client and I talked through the situations in which he felt the need to exert more control, we found that the reason was rarely an inexperienced or incompetent employee. In some cases we found that he needed to be clearer about the high level goal as well as the parameters (success criteria, budget, time frame, etc.) for achieving that goal.

In one case he had an employee who was clearly capable and hard working, but was also doing things that made the boss feel somehow uneasy – uneasy enough to step in and manage every step of the way. He realized that he needed to have a direct conversation with the employee about the cause of his unease and try to negotiate some reciprocal changes in behavior. (Yup, I'm back to banging the drum about feedback!)

Are you willing to have a conversation with your direct reports about this?

IV. FINAL THOUGHTS: Caveat and Credit

Caveat

I know you are just dying to forward this e-mail to your boss. Perhaps with a wink ;-) or even a "See! I told you that you were managing me all wrong!". Don't give in to that urge. Start at home.

Send it to your direct reports instead and suggest a conversation about what you could do to better support them in doing great work -- as well as what you might need from them to feel comfortable in stepping back a bit.

Credit

Thanks to Professor David Bradford for this exercise and the opportunity to listen in on his Executive Education program on Leadership.

www.gsb.stanford.edu/exed/lead/

While you're thinking about it, send a quick e-mail to say "thank you" to the boss who supported you in doing your best work. Your boss showed true leadership by creating a space to shine and will appreciate knowing that you noticed.

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

Management Shorts is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

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