



# Your Team Members Are Individuals Too

Manage Both Teams and People

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Why People Skills Are Critical to Becoming a Great Boss

EXCERPTED FROM

*Being the Boss:*

*The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*

BY

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# 10

## YOUR TEAM MEMBERS ARE INDIVIDUALS TOO

### *Manage Both Teams and People*

**2:25 p.m.** Jason follows Jay into room A, an enclosed meeting room, and shuts the door. Jay sets up his laptop to show the promotion piece.

“Wait,” Jason says. “Before you do that, Jay, I have to tell you that what you said to Sumantra was unacceptable. We cannot have people attacking each other personally.”

“Okay, okay.” Jay shrugs. “I mouthed off. I got carried away. Sorry. You know me.”

“That’s not good enough,” Jason says. “And it doesn’t matter if I know you or not. You went too far and made it personal, and I’m calling you on it. When everyone else comes in, I expect you to apologize—sincerely—to Sumantra. Since you attacked him in public, you need to apologize in public.”

Jay looks at Jason as if the thought were ludicrous. “I was right,” he says. “Sumantra thinks he’s going back to his buddies in editorial when Project Emerge tanks. Don’t burn your—”

“Now you’re doing it all over again,” Jason says. “Stop it. You don’t know what Sumantra thinks. And your approach doesn’t change anything. It just lets you vent your frustration.”

“I’m not the problem,” Jay says, in a more subdued tone. “Believe me, I’m not the problem.”

“Look,” Jason says, “I’m going to work with you on this but be clear: if you attack someone personally again, we’re going to have a talk about your future here.”

Jay looks surprised. “All right,” he says. “I hear you.”

“Good. I mean it.”

“Can I show you the promo?”

“Sure.”

Jason watches the seven-minute piece in silence. It’s what a school official will see when visiting the Reynolds Ed site for more information. And it’s truly good—interesting, engaging, and informative. It not only describes how the whole process works for all involved, it also conveys a strong sense of how the course will look and feel and how the student will experience it. Jason couldn’t have hoped for anything more appealing. He was vastly relieved. Maybe, he thinks, Jay does have the development process under control.

“It’s good, Jay. Good work,” Jason says when it’s done.

“It’s not just *good*,” Jay says, “it’s outstanding. It’s wonderful. It’s beautiful. It brings tears to your eyes, and it’s a programming course, for heaven’s sake!”

“It’s extremely good. I enjoyed watching it. I think it does the job.”

“It does, doesn’t it? I’m glad you think so. I had to push and push eMedia, but they finally got it. And I’ll tell you a secret. On Monday we get the first version of the actual course for review and testing. We’re right on schedule. And it’s beautiful. Just like the promo.”

“That’s great news, Jay,” says Jason. “I’m relieved to hear that, and I’m eager to see it. I suppose it uses the content you sponged that I’ve been hearing about.”

“Absolutely,” says Jay with a grin.

“Don’t be so pleased with yourself,” Jason says. “This isn’t an ‘us against them’ game. You’re aggravating a problem that was tough enough already. You act like we only have to do this one course, when the ultimate goal is to create a business that makes

many courses. And for every course, we need to be partners with the groups that provide the content we use. That's the only way Project Emerge can succeed.”

Manage your people as a team, but never lose sight of this reality: team members are people who still want to be seen and cared about as individuals. It's human nature—and the paradox of teams. Most of us want to belong to a group. That's a powerful urge. But, simultaneously, we each want recognition for our personal contribution.

The way to deal with the paradox is to keep in mind the context of the team when managing individual team members. Recognize each for their contributions to the team, for their faithful compliance with team standards and expectations, and, not least, for their constructive disagreement within the team when that occurs.

Don't let team rules and expectations become so restrictive that they allow no individual latitude. Make the team a place where both sets of needs—individual and team—can work in partnership, where individual needs can be met through the team.

## **How Well Do You Interact with Your People?**

Much of management consists of simple interaction with others—making contact, engaging in positive, respectful give-and-take, and connecting as both a professional and a human being.<sup>1</sup> You've probably worked with managers so focused on their work that they walked the halls with a quick stride, head down, ignoring everyone else. How did people feel about them?

### **Do You Have Lots of Varied Dealings with Your People?**

Effective relationships require frequent contact. In fact, good managers spend most of their time interacting with their direct reports and others. Management is a contact sport. How much of your time do you spend engaging with others? It should be substantial.

A significant portion of people's trust will be based on their day-to-day interactions with you.

### **Are You Open and Accessible?**

In effective relationships, both parties initiate contact. Is a substantial portion of your contacts initiated by others? This requires that you make yourself accessible. For example, is your office door mostly open, and are you frequently where people can approach you? Are you psychologically available? Are your body language, demeanor, and other nonverbal cues welcoming and positive? Some bosses exude an aura that says, "Don't bother me."

### **Would People Say You're Honest and Forthright in All Your Dealings?**

Do you strive to be truthful? When you say something, can people believe you and count on you to do what you say?

### **Would People Say They Know Where You Stand?**

Clarity and candor not only help people work together but also are signs of respect. Do you let people know when and why you're displeased? Equally important, do you let them know when you're pleased and why?

### **In Your Contacts, Do You Fully Engage the Other Person?**

Do you make a real human connection in every interaction? When a direct report talks to you, no matter the subject, are you fully focused? Do you listen and ask questions? Is there genuine give-and-take, a real dialogue, with both of you contributing substantially, if not always equally? Remember what we noted earlier: real listening means you're willing to change your mind based on what you hear. Or are you always telling and selling?

Your people bring all of themselves to work, and you'll sometimes find yourself listening to people's personal problems. You need not resolve or take responsibility for these problems, and you may sometimes have to limit the time spent on them. But you do need to listen, recognize and respect people's feelings, treat

them confidentially, and when relevant and appropriate, take them into account.

### **Do You Pay Attention to All Your People?**

Those who work for you know how and with whom you spend your time. They watch. Those left out know they're on the outside. So be aware of how much and with whom you interact. Keep contact time roughly equitable over a period of time. *Equitable* does not mean *equal*. Events and problems will lead you at times to focus on some people more than others. Besides, some people want lots of contact, while others don't. The goal is to give each person what she or he needs.

#### ***What About Distant Team Members?***

It's easy to overlook people who aren't physically present every day because they're located elsewhere or they telecommute. Since you and they won't have the spontaneous give-and-take that creates any strong relationship, you'll need to be proactive and systematic in contacting them. Talk regularly on the phone or by videophone to review work, solicit ideas and opinions, get to know them, share your thoughts, and generally stay in touch. Arrange to meet them whenever possible. Take responsibility for keeping them connected.

#### ***What About Older, More Experienced Team Members?***

Younger managers are often intimidated by older, experienced people and avoid them. Or they consider them intractable dinosaurs. Get to know them each as individuals; find out what they have done, know, and can do. Be willing to learn from them, seek their help and advice, and ask what they need. Ask them too, if appropriate, to mentor younger team members. Even if they know more about the work than you and have done it longer, they still look to you for support, resources, and information, as well as political and strategic guidance. Perhaps you're being fast tracked, and they're plateaued in their career growth. Remember, they also hope and deserve to keep learning and have access to appropriate opportunities. If you neglect their development, they will become

the resistant dinosaurs you at first—mistakenly—assumed them to be.

If they do seem uncomfortable with your role as their boss, you might need to have an explicit conversation with them about their reservations. Avoiding the subject will not make it go away. If you do confront them, do it in a way that's not accusatory or threatening—by saying, for example, “I get the impression, I could be wrong, you're not comfortable with me as your leader. How can I help you? What can I do to help make this situation work?”

***What About Your Steady but Not Star Team Members?***

Most managers focus on team members at the extremes—the high and low performers, who do need attention. But in most groups the bulk of work is done by the majority of people in between—competent, steady, dependable B players who know and do their jobs but don't stand out. They plug away and rarely ask for much. If you were a star performer, beware the trap of undervaluing such “merely competent” people. Don't accuse them of lacking motivation or skill. It's easy to overlook them—until they leave. Then you'll discover how much you depend on them.<sup>2</sup>

***What About Individuals You Don't Like or Understand?***

This is the acid test of your interpersonal maturity as a manager. If you rely on your gut to drive your relationships, you'll only feel comfortable with people similar and familiar to you. Human chemistry guarantees that you'll like some people and dislike others. Those you dislike are the ones you avoid when you walk around the office. Perhaps they remind you of someone in your past, but the reason doesn't matter, except that knowing it may help you get over it. Find some way to interact or even work with those you need but dislike. Get to know them. Most negative feelings diminish with familiarity. They probably don't like you either. Take responsibility for making the relationship what it should be.

***What About People on Your Team Who Don't Report to You Directly?***

Of course, most of your interactions will probably be with the direct reports you pick to help you build and run your part of the

organization. Don't forget, however, that you're responsible for your entire group, including those who work for the people who report to you directly. You must find ways to build connections with *all* those who work for you, both direct and indirect reports.<sup>3</sup>

Find ways to have contact, including real interaction, with your indirect reports without undermining the authority of their bosses who report to you. You need to know what's happening on the front lines. It's too easy to become isolated and hear only what intermediaries want you to know. You need rich sources of timely and critical information about the big picture, priorities, key opportunities, and challenges. You also want to recognize achievements throughout your group.

Use the many tools, such as social media, that encourage people to share their ideas and thoughts. But don't let them replace real face-to-face contact. Walk around. Get on a plane and visit distant group members as often as your company permits. Get to know names, the day-to-day realities of working with customers, and something personal about all your people.

Some companies we know require managers to hold town halls or meet at least once a year for extended, informal chats with people down the line. It's not a bad idea. Ask your direct reports to include their people in meetings, as appropriate. Put your indirect reports on subgroups or task forces. Attend gatherings where you can chat with them or be around where they work. Give them assignments (coordinate this with their bosses, your direct reports). Keep in mind: these are likely successors if one of your direct reports leaves. Contact with them will help you learn firsthand their strengths and weaknesses. It will also help you find out whether team purpose, goals, strategies, and culture are permeating the entire group, and it will provide the firsthand data necessary to make succession decisions.

Do these questions help you develop some sense of what it's like to deal with you? This is a question we raise again and again because it's so important. How do people experience you? How does dealing with you make them feel about themselves?

Think about your interactions as if you were the other person. What was she looking for? Did he get it from you? Do you think

she came away feeling more able or positive about whatever you discussed or about herself? Was he more able and willing to do the work, or to work with you, because of your interaction?

If you're not sure how to answer, think about how you can gain some insight. Think about asking your human resource department to help you conduct an appropriate 360-degree survey of those you work with. Taking that step requires courage because it involves some risk—you may hear painful things—but the feedback can make you a much more effective manager.

All this requires time and effort you surely feel you don't have. The issue is not so much the amount of time you spend with others but the quality of interaction. A short, focused connection is better than a long but distracted interaction. As much as possible, build ongoing connections into the nooks and crannies of your days. Take advantage of hallway meetings and chance encounters. The challenge of virtual groups is that you need to be much more thoughtful and deliberate about making connections.

## How Well Do You Know Your People?

If you don't know your people, you cannot make intelligent decisions about assignments for them, and you cannot capture their commitment or decide how much to trust and delegate to them. Nor can you fairly assess and weigh their interests as you make difficult choices that involve them.

Use the following questions as rough guides to assess what you know or need to find out.

**What is this person's *generation*, and what does that say about her approach to life and work?** Knowing her generation—preboomer, boomer, Gen X, Gen Y/Millennial—can provide clues about her attitudes toward life and work. Try to understand how her generation differs from yours. The Web makes this information easy to find.

**What are this person's *career aspirations*?** What does he hope to accomplish, and where does he want to be in five or ten years? How can his current work help him achieve these goals?

**What is this person's *life stage*, and what does that tell you about his needs and concerns?** Single, single with children, married with no children, raising a young family, empty nester, putting children through college? Life stage and generation were once related, but the stage of life when people marry and bring up families now varies so much, it's sometimes hard to correlate the two.

**In what *culture* was this person raised?** The national or ethnic cultures in which she grew up can have an enormous impact on the attitudes, values, and assumptions she brings to work and to life in general.

**What are this person's *outside interests*?** Does he devote time and effort to activities outside work? Church? Community? Education? Such interests can be revealing. We know someone who does clerical work in the office, but outside she organized and ran a successful \$200,000 building campaign for her local community center. People's real talents aren't always recognized or utilized at work.

**What is this person's unique *life history*?** Where did she grow up? Under what circumstances? What key life experiences made her the person she is?

**What are this person's *strengths* as a person and as a team member?** Most managers have no trouble identifying someone's weaknesses. They interpret their role as evaluators to mean they must focus there and devote far less attention to people's strengths. Yet people's strengths are what will take your team where it needs to go.<sup>4</sup> If you cannot immediately identify each team member's strengths, perhaps you're too focused on weaknesses.

### **Do You Know Your People Well Enough to Empathize with Them?**

You need empathy, the ability to see the world as others see it without being captured by their point of view. This is the only way to understand truly why people think and feel as they do. Unless you can put yourself in their place, you won't be able to manage them well. Develop the mental habit, when dealing with someone, of pausing three seconds and trying to step into their shoes.

Empathy is possible only if you realize that others are fundamentally different from you. Yes, you know others look,

dress, act, and talk differently. But do you understand that they think and feel differently too? They have different goals, fears, needs, sources of satisfaction, and ways of looking at the world. You cannot put yourself in their place unless you appreciate how profound these differences are.

Understand what real empathy is. It's not simply understanding how *you* would feel in someone else's position but how *that person* feels, given who they are. It often requires that we accept and understand feelings quite different from our own. This is why you need to know each of your people as unique individuals.

Ultimate empathy, of course, is the ability to see not just the world but *yourself* as others do.

## Do You Delegate?

Are you good at delegating? It's a key way you work with the individuals who work for you. You'll never get the best from others or leverage yourself as a manager if you cannot let go of the notion that you must guide and oversee every step your people take.

Delegating well requires making judgments person by person about current skill levels, whom to trust, the importance of the work at hand, the consequences of failure, and the level of involvement to maintain. It can be risky, but you cannot succeed without doing it.

Some first-level managers who were stars as individual contributors are good enough that they can successfully micromanage all their people. They can succeed without delegating. The trap here is twofold: they limit the effectiveness of their current group, and they set themselves up for future failure. At some point, as they advance, they physically and mentally won't be able to micromanage all the work. Delegation is a skill that requires experience to learn. Better to begin learning from the start.

Delegation is *not* abdication. It's not a binary choice between close guidance versus no involvement. There are many steps in

between, and managers willing to learn eventually discover there are levels of delegation, depending on the subordinate's readiness, motivation, and the task at hand.

Don't hide behind the excuse many managers offer: they justify themselves by warning of the consequences. We know a German manager who, when told to delegate more, told his boss, "There is, of course, a danger that we will become a bit sluggish . . . and . . . make mistakes or miss opportunities."

That may be an adequate reason for not delegating if you've just taken over a group. But if you use it after managing for a time, then you're failing. It's your responsibility to make sure you have people to whom you can give responsibility and authority. Nothing will hold back your career more than a reputation as someone who cannot delegate or manage people's performance.

## **Do You Know How to Develop People and Improve Their Performance?**

Everyone recognizes the benefits when your people learn and grow. They become more able and motivated, and they produce better results. Creating the future you want, reaching the goals you've set, will depend on the ability of your people to increase the knowledge and skills they already have, develop new competencies, and overcome debilitating weaknesses.

Developing people is also a way to engage them. All of us are more likely to commit to managers and organizations that help us improve in our work and move ahead in our careers. Most of us like to get better and we even like to be pushed moderately. It's not unusual for organizations to discover in exit interviews that people leave because they weren't growing or learning.

What is your role as manager in your people's development? You cannot "develop" someone else. In the end, all development is *self*-development. Yet your role is crucial. In a nutshell, it is this: people learn by trying, learning, and trying again. Your job is to provide new challenges—opportunities where the consequences

of failure are minor—followed by feedback, coaching, and the ability to try again.

How well do you foster the growth of your people? Are you setting the expectations, providing the opportunities, along with the coaching and other help people need to take charge of their own development?

### **Do You Know How Each of Your People Needs to Grow?**

The ability of your team to carry out its plans and reach its goals will depend on the knowledge, values, and skills of individual team members. Hence, preparing plans for the personal development of each member should be part of defining and preparing for the future you and your group want.

Prepare a written *individual development plan* with each team member. In it, identify his current set of competencies (knowledge, skills, values) and compare them with (a) what his role *currently* requires and (b) what it will require *in the future*. The gap between actual and needed competencies both now and in the future becomes the basis of that member's plan. Specify what needs developing and how it will happen—developmental assignments, a company course, mentoring by a more experienced team member, and so on. In each plan include the person's own career hopes and plans. The needs of the group should take precedence, but the more you incorporate a team member's aspirations, the better. In fact, a good way to begin an individual development plan is to ask the individual to prepare a first draft that includes the elements just noted, along with any personal hopes and aspirations.

### **Do You Encourage Team Values That Foster and Expect Personal Growth?**

A team can be a motivating environment for continuous development. What better reason to grow than the prospect of making a greater contribution to the team and its purpose? Team members are far more likely to work at getting better if colleagues expect each other to strive for improvement. You cannot

impose this value, but it's one you can express, encourage, and reward.

### Do You Coach People Every Day?

Do you think coaching is something you do only occasionally or as problems arise?<sup>5</sup> If so, you should broaden your thinking. Virtually every interaction you have is an opportunity to assess, explain, show, or encourage someone. Coaching involves talking someone through an activity, either before or after they do it, in order to improve their performance. It involves explaining, asking questions, demonstrating, role playing, and critiquing what you observed—whatever's appropriate for helping someone do better. It's usually best done quietly, person to person. The test of a good coaching session is that the person you're coaching leaves it both more able and more confident.

In the preparatory discussion before an activity, talk about goals, ideal outcomes, boundaries, and guidelines. People often don't know how to be different, and so merely describing what's needed is often not enough. You may need to show them or demonstrate what you want. In the review discussion, begin with the person's self-evaluation and lessons learned based on the preparatory coaching. Expand on the person's own insights, if necessary, followed by what might be done differently next time. In giving feedback, be descriptive, not judgmental, and as specific and concrete as possible.

We know a rising star in a leading investment bank who was recognized for his outstanding ability to bring in business. But he was also known for his impatience with colleagues who didn't, to use his words, "get with the program right away." He seemed to have a gift for leaving associates feeling battered and bruised. He knew of these problems because in his formal annual review his manager had told him of his effect on others. But little changed until he got a new boss who day by day—not once a year—pointed out his misbehaviors *as they occurred* and specifically coached him each time on better approaches.

Think back over the past two or three workdays. On how many of those days did you give people specific performance feedback

and coaching? You should be doing it every day, even several times a day. *Use every possible opportunity, day by day and incident by incident, to review, critique, praise, and coach.* If you're not doing it every day, you're missing opportunities.

### **Do You Discourage Upward Delegation?**

How often do you end a discussion with one of your people and discover that the next step is yours to do? It happens all the time, and it can act as a major drag on your time—not to mention the loss of an opportunity for your subordinate to learn. At the end of every interaction, ask, “What happens next and who's responsible?” If you're responsible, ask whether progress really must depend on you. Sometimes there's no way around it. But when that's not the case, find some way to keep responsibility where it almost always belongs: on your subordinate's shoulders.<sup>6</sup>

### **Do You Help People Evaluate Themselves?**

In many cases, those who lack knowledge and skill cannot recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, precisely because of their ignorance. It's your job as manager to help them assess themselves accurately. If people don't know where they're good and where they're not, they won't know what to emphasize and where to get better.

### **Do You Use the Talent on Your Team to Help People Develop?**

Teams contain a mix of talent, expertise, and experience that members can draw upon. If you partner experienced and inexperienced team members to carry out a task, you can both accomplish essential work and simultaneously make the inexperienced member more proficient.

### **Do You Make Clear Your Willingness to Help?**

Do people see you primarily as judge and jury of their performance? They will, out of caution, unless you make clear your willingness to coach, teach, counsel, provide learning opportunities,

make corporate resources available (such as courses), create developmental assignments, and remove obstacles that might be blocking progress. You cannot abdicate either role of developer or evaluator, but you can make clear you play both roles, not just that of judge. Ask people to let you know how you can help them improve.

### **Do You Know How to Conduct a Performance Appraisal?**

A performance appraisal differs from a coaching session. Where coaching focuses on one aspect of performance and is often done on the fly, a performance appraisal is a dedicated discussion that touches on *all or most aspects* of someone's performance. It may include coaching but also involves much more. Many companies require such an appraisal every year, but that isn't often enough. You should talk frequently with people about how they're doing—identifying strengths, praising good performance, pointing out problematic weaknesses, coaching for specific behaviors, and counseling. As we described earlier, use individual development plans as the basis for these discussions, and keep the plans updated by noting progress or problems.

As you review performance, keep these guidelines in mind.

**Always discuss a person's performance in the context of the team—its purpose, goals, strategies, and plans.** Here, *how* they do their work is important—their ability and willingness to function as team members—not just *what* they do. Recognize individual performance, even when team performance falls short, but avoid the impression that individuals can win while the team is losing.

**Remember: the only purpose of an appraisal discussion is to improve future results.** Review the past only to the extent such information will lead to better future results. Most of all, an appraisal is not an opportunity to vent frustration you feel about someone's past performance. Keep your personal feelings out of it. Be candid. Be clear about consequences. But don't be angry. And never treat anyone with disrespect. In giving feedback:

- Cover the positive, not just the negative.
- Give specific, concrete, recent examples of both.

- Describe rather than evaluate, conclude, and judge.
- Focus on the problem, not the person.
- Have a discussion in which you listen as well as talk; avoid declarations and pronouncements.
- Avoid criticism of general personality traits—“You’re not assertive enough!”—because it’s irritating and not helpful.
- Always end the appraisal with next steps—an action plan for building strengths and overcoming serious weaknesses.

**Be prepared for disagreement.** When someone disagrees with your assessment, stick with metrics, data, and concrete examples. Explore an issue rather than argue about it, and never allow the discussion to become personal. If the two of you cannot reach agreement, identify ways to watch for the behavior in question. When you see it reappear, discuss the incident as soon as possible. Be clear about what new information or evidence will lead either of you to change your mind.

Don’t withhold important negative feedback for fear of conflict or upsetting the person. More than one manager has let someone’s performance deteriorate to the point where she must be disciplined or fired. Such outcomes are grossly unfair if they come as a surprise, especially if an earlier discussion might have set the person straight.<sup>7</sup>

### **Do You Know How to Deal with Poor Performance?**

Disciplining or firing an employee requires care, skill, and humanity. They are the hardest parts of being a boss, but they’re unavoidable.

Many managers struggle with the fact that they’re dealing with people’s lives. Being fired is more than a setback, a personal bump in the road. It’s a blow to ego and self-esteem, not only at work but at home and socially. Spouses, partners, and children are often directly affected too. No wonder many managers spend sleepless nights going over and over what they could or should do. By the time they fire someone, they’ve usually devoted a great deal of time to the person, had a number of tough conversations, and

gotten to know the person professionally and personally. They often consider a termination a personal failure, particularly if they hired the person.

These feelings are normal and good, a sign of your compassion and humanity. But they cannot stop you from taking necessary action. Even if you were part of the problem, poor performers cannot stay on the team.

A manager we knew conducted an informal and unscientific poll of experienced managers. “When you look back over your experience,” he asked, “what do you think you could have done better?” What he heard most often matched his own experience: “I didn’t face up to people decisions fast enough. I usually knew someone wasn’t going to make it well before I actually did anything about it. I wish I’d faced those issues quicker, resolved them, and gone on. Everyone would have been better off.”

When someone’s performance is obviously unacceptable and everyone knows it, including the person herself, it’s easier to take action, especially if the person has had every opportunity to improve. But some situations are not so easy. They will test you as a manager.

Consider the situation of a person whose performance was acceptable but is no longer. This occurs at times of change when some people cannot adopt the new values, skills, relationships, or thinking needed.

A second situation may be even harder. This is one in which you must terminate an employee who’s good but not good enough to help the group reach the future it wants. This can happen with longtime employees whose level of work has been adequate so far but won’t be sufficient to help the team grow and attain more ambitious goals.

In both situations, you should make every effort to find alternative work for the person. But if you cannot, you must—with all possible humanity and care—let them go. It will be a severe test of your managerial will.

When you’re dealing with a poor performer whose job is in danger, consider these questions.

***Do You Understand That Disciplining and Firing Are Multistep Processes That Need to Be Followed Systematically?***

Disciplining and firing should include not only what we suggest here but also the policies and practices of your organization. As soon as you realize an employee is a “poor performer,” let your boss know, and contact your firm’s HR department for guidance.

***Do You Start by Trying to Understand the Reasons for Poor Performance? (It’s Not Always the Person)***

We tend to assume that responsibility for poor performance rests with the individual. Either they lack motivation or knowledge and skill. However, there are other possible reasons. The job may be poorly designed. Look at it and the work involved. Some jobs are failure traps. Given the realities of the organization and the work, no one is likely to succeed in them. Or the job may be fine, but the fit between the job and the person is poor; it doesn’t use the strengths of the person, or it calls on him to perform activities he doesn’t like or value. In these situations, consider modifying the job if appropriate—“job sculpting” is becoming more common—or moving the person to a position that makes better use of his skills and interests.

***Are You Careful Not to Set People Up for Failure?***

Have you been clear and forthright about the work and what you expect? Is there any chance you’ve confused the person, and he’s not sure what to do?

Sometimes managers create situations that lead inevitably to a person’s failure.<sup>8</sup> You may have done this yourself. You conclude you don’t want this person in his job. It may be something about his work or demeanor. Perhaps you inherited him from a previous manager, and you conclude, “He’s not one of us.” Having privately turned against him, you begin looking for evidence to justify the conclusion you’ve already reached.

Even if you say nothing of this to the person, he can sense it in your actions, words, tone of voice, and general treatment. Believing he’s been written off, he becomes discouraged and his

work suffers. He avoids you, hides or ignores problems, and may even steer clear of team colleagues, who then turn against him too. He enters a vicious, downward spiral, at the bottom of which his performance justifies firing him, though it didn't in the beginning.

Is this really a performance issue? Be aware of this downward spiral, aptly called the “set-up-to-fail syndrome,” and recognize it early while there's still time to turn it into a straightforward, rational, and fair review process.

***Do You Let People Know When They're in Trouble, and Help Them Improve?***

If someone's job is in jeopardy, and you've satisfied yourself the person is responsible, she has a right to know she's at risk, why, and what she can do to salvage her performance. She also has a right to whatever help you can provide. Her team colleagues will expect, first, that you deal with her performance—a weak performer will drag down the whole group. Second, they will want you to deal with her fairly and forthrightly. Don't play games by telling her she's in trouble only after you've concluded she must leave.

***When People Must Go, Do You Help Them Leave with Dignity?***

Termination is a serious matter, never to be taken lightly. Some managers, distraught that they must fire someone, justify their action to others and to themselves by demonizing the person. We once heard a senior manager describe someone he was thinking of firing as not only inept but without *any* merit, personal or professional. We knew the person and understood why he had to leave, but we also knew the manager's description was extreme and unfair—so unfair, in fact, it diminished the manager in others' eyes.

It's important that you remain aware of your own feelings throughout this process. Don't let your own sense of dissonance—the conflict inside you between the “good” person you think you are and the necessity of doing such harm to someone—push you to demonize the person. Recognizing and managing your own

feelings—emotional maturity—will help you treat the person with dignity through the difficult process of termination.

Treating any employee without respect, even when asking her to leave, is shameful and unnecessary. Unless she's being fired for cause—dealing drugs in the parking lot or physically attacking a fellow employee, for example—the details and explanation of her departure should be negotiated and handled as the painful but reasonable action it is. Help her leave with whatever separation benefits you can provide and with words of support and encouragement. Obviously, you must observe at all times your organization's policies and procedures.

## **Do You Know How to Select the Right People for Your Team?**

Having described how to remove a team member, we want to end on a more positive note: how to add people. Managing individuals begins with hiring them.<sup>9</sup>

Nothing you do will be more important than finding the right people.

Hiring mistakes are difficult and painful to correct. The real danger is not that you hire people who are outright wrong, but that you add people who are adequate but not truly good or don't match well with the work. You can get everything else right and sabotage it all by hiring the wrong people.

But who are the right people?

Until you've clarified your team's purpose, goals, ways of working, standards, and values, you can't identify the right people. The right person is not just anyone talented but someone who's right for the job *and* for your team and its work.

Here are some guidelines.

### **Do You Start with a Candidate's Competence: What She Knows, Can Do, and Has Done?**

However attractive a candidate may be in other ways, you need to satisfy minimum standards for the knowledge, skills, and

experience the job requires. This may seem obvious, but we've seen too many managers find a candidate so attractive in other ways, they overlook glaring holes in what they know, can do, or have done. Other characteristics matter too, and some parts of the work can be learned on the job, but it's hard to make up for a lack of basic competence.

### **Do You Look for More Than Competence?**

Competence is relatively straightforward to assess, and interpersonal skills can be uncovered, but character can be difficult to determine. Here are some ways to get at it.

**Ask open-ended questions that aren't easy to answer briefly.** Encourage the candidate to tell stories about his experience, including times when things didn't go particularly well. Stories can be much more revealing of character than answers to specific, detailed questions. And don't just accept the story as told. Ask for detail. Ask probing questions about what happened. Ask the candidate to tell the story from the point of view of someone else who was involved. Don't accept broad generalizations and clichés.

After asking open-ended questions, *be silent and let the candidate answer fully*. Even when she stops talking, say nothing for several moments. Some of the best information emerges when an interviewee feels compelled to fill the silence. An interview is not a conversation, and it's not your job to move things along briskly. Wait and listen.

**Go beyond references.** Do talk to the references provided by a candidate, but it's critical that you talk to others as well. Talk to former bosses, peers, and even subordinates—anyone who knows the candidate and his work. Ask for names of people who figured in a story the candidate told, and talk to them.

**Have others interview promising candidates,** including members of your team and people in your network who would deal with this person. Involve your boss for especially important and highly visible jobs. Never depend entirely on your own judgment.

**Is the candidate genuinely and personally interested in what your group does?** Describe your team's work to candidates, especially its purpose and goals. Paint a picture of the future you're trying to

create and the way team members work together. Every candidate will say she's interested, but can you detect any sign of genuine connection? Does she spontaneously mention anything in her experience or even her life that resonates with your team's aspirations? It might be a hobby or volunteer work, anything to indicate the existence of genuine personal interest in the work and your goals. The ideal candidate is someone for whom the work will be more than a job.

**Look for diversity.** Hiring someone new is an opportunity to add different experience and a fresh outlook to your team. You want someone who fits in—whose basic values and interests mirror the team's—but not someone who simply blends in. This is a real danger because we're naturally attracted to people who are similar to us. This requires a delicate balance, but you and your team must embrace *both* collective purpose, goals, and priorities *and* individual diversity.

**Pay special attention to a candidate's unique strengths.** Is she analytical, good at explaining complex ideas, able to connect with others quickly and genuinely? Above all, look for strengths that match the needs of the job. You want the candidate, if hired, to enjoy exercising her unique skills. Will the job challenge her to develop and expand those skills?

Understand the candidate's weaknesses too, her lack of certain competencies or experience, as well as any parts of the work she dislikes doing. Make sure her weaknesses won't be fatal and can be balanced by you or colleagues. In sum: hire for strength, not to avoid weakness. Just make sure weaknesses won't be fatal.

### **Are You Willing to Hire People Who Are Better Than You or Who Compensate for Your Weaknesses?**

Many managers say they try to find people who're smarter or more experienced or better than they, or who balance their weaknesses. But, in fact, the people they hire mostly fall short of those standards.

Do you have people who are better or smarter than you, or who provide some skills you're lacking? If not, why not? Think of the last batch of job candidates you reviewed. Did you find some

reason not to hire the very best? If so, you may view your people as competition. Perhaps you're still judging yourself against the standards that applied when you were an individual producer. Perhaps you wrongly think of the boss as the one who's supposed to be the best on your team or who knows the most.

Do you have a successor? If you disappeared suddenly, could one of your people step into your shoes or grow into them with reasonable help? If you don't, why not? You're more likely to be promoted if your bosses know someone's ready to take your place.

To achieve the results you want, you need a team. But a team cannot function well if its members feel their individuality and contributions go unrecognized. This is one of the basic paradoxes of management. If you don't manage the constant tension here, these forces can weaken and eventually destroy the ability of a team to do its collective work well. Balance both sets of needs, always letting the team set the context.

# NOTES

## Chapter 10

1. For insights into how to build effective relationships with your people, see, for example, Linda A. Hill, “Building Effective One-on-One Work Relationships (A),” Case 9-497-028 (Boston: Harvard Business School, 1996).

2. Thomas DeLong and Vineeta Vijayaraghavan, “Let’s Hear It for B Players,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2003, 96–102.

3. See, for example, Sumantra Ghoshal and Christopher A. Bartlett, *The Individualized Corporation: A Fundamentally New Approach to Management: Great Companies Are Defined by Purpose, Process, and People* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1997), chap. 8 and 9.

4. See for example, Jane E. Dutton and Robert E. Quinn, *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003); and James L. Heskett, Earl W. Sasser, and Joe Wheeler, *The Ownership Quotient: Putting the Service Profit Chain to Work for Unbeatable Competitive Advantage* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008).

5. See, for example, Marshall Goldsmith, Laurence Lyons, and Alyssa Freas, eds., *Coaching for Leadership: How the World’s Greatest Coaches Help Leaders Learn* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass/Pfeiffer, 2000); and Noel M. Tichy, *The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2002).

6. William Oncken Jr. and Donald L. Wass, “Management Time: Who’s Got the Monkey?” *Harvard Business Review*, November–December 1974, 27–36.

7. See, for example, Carol R. Rogers and Fritz J. Roethlisberger, “Barriers and Gateways to Communication,” *Harvard Business Review*, November–December 1991, 46–52; and Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

8. Jean-François Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux, “The Set-Up-to-Fail-Syndrome,” *Harvard Business Review*, March–April 1998, 101–113.

9. See, for example, Claudio Fernandez-Araoz, *Great People Decisions: Why They Matter So Much, Why They Are So Hard, and How You Can Master Them* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007).