keeping employees by keeping them happy

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Part II — Management 101

Editor's Note: Chris wrote a three-part series, Part I of which appeared in 2000. The other two descended into a black hole on your editor's computer, only to resurface recently. Expect Part III in the next issue.

Employee retention is a difficult challenge that faces most managers today. This series is designed to help managers better understand the unique needs of employees, the measures necessary for keeping them happy, and the justification and reasoning for doing so.

If you have missed one or more of this series of articles, please feel free to read them at the author's Web site: *http://www.3rdmoon.com/crusso/articles.*

A large part of ensuring that your employees are kept happy is making certain that you, as a manager, are behaving in a manner that is appropriate to your station. If you are not, then your team will be directly affected in a number of ways: one, your actions are likely to actually cause problems that the team will have to deal with or clean up later; and two, whether you cause problems or not, they will be annoyed or upset by your actions. In either case, your staff will not be very happy with you, and in time are likely to leave.

The following is a list of things that I believe are most critical to keep in mind when working day-to-day as a manager. As you read, genuinely ask yourself how many of these principles you think you are following – and how many you are not. Consider making a list as you read.

Every Situation Is Different

It is very important to understand that every single person, and every single situation, is very different from every other. This means that there can be absolutely no hard-and-fast rule for every company, department, group, or individual.

For example, some employees are very senior and capable, and can probably work with little or no intervention from a manager for days and weeks on end. If you stand over these people, guiding their every move, your tires will probably be slashed by the end of the week. There are others who will need step-by-step guidance on an hourly basis. If you let these employees work on their own for weeks on end, they will likely wind up doing something completely inappropriate, or possibly doing absolutely nothing at all.

There are also effects based upon the size of your group. If you manage a smaller group, your personal "technical" involvement might be fairly significant. If, however, you manage a larger group, you may simply not have time to be so involved, and may not even know much about the technical aspects of what your team does.

But even if you do work in a larger group, there's the chance that a critical emergency might come up on a day when much of your staff is out. You may not have touched the "technology" itself for six months, but sure as the day is long, you had better roll up your sleeves, grab a screwdriver, and jump into the fray with what staff you have.

Otherwise, your group is going to have some serious problems, and your team is not likely to be very impressed when they're working until midnight and you left at 5:00 and are home watching *The Simpsons*.

Remember, You Are the Boss

A great many of my philosophies strongly promote the notion of having the team decide the best solution to this issue or that. This is critically important, and is the cornerstone of most of my feelings on how to keep a team happy and productive.

In fact, if you ask me, I will usually be the first to say that "I don't really do anything," "I'm just another member of the team with a different role," and "Talk to him – he's the guy on my team who actually makes the decision with regards to x, y, or z."

It is, however, very important to remember that you are still the boss. It is good to take up the "I'm just a member of the team" position and posture within your team on many things, but it is equally important to be able to step up and make a firm statement of direction or policy when it is needed. Again, remember that every situation and every person is different – you are really just going to have to use your best judgment and see how it goes.

Management ≠ Perfection

Just because you are the manager does not mean that you are infallible. Nor does it mean that you are any better than anyone else. People who feel that they have attained some sort of perfection – whether they are management or otherwise – are simply fooling themselves.

You are not perfect – you are not even close. The most amazing and capable people I know are the ones who are well into their later years and still saying things like "I'm just learning," "I learn a little more every day," and "Oooops!"

You will make mistakes, just like anyone else. What's more, you should own up to them whenever you do make mistakes. It will allow you to grow as a person, and in fact, your team is likely to harbor significant respect for your ability to simply look a little sheepish and simply say "Oops! Sorry!"

Provide Direction

It is important that a manager provide his or her team with a clear and consistent direction. This doesn't mean that you should be lording it over everyone or mandating exact procedures by which everything is done. Rather, it means that you should provide guidelines and methods of operation that are consistent with your corporation and departmental goals.

For example, if you run an IT group for a major corporation, you are likely to want to provide directions like: "Try to minimize turnaround time on all ticket closures," "Ensure that each customer feels they have been helped in a friendly manner," or "Trim the top 10% of simple calls from the call queue."

Under most circumstances, you should not be determining exactly how this is to be done. For example, in the scenario we mentioned above, you probably would not want to mandate things like "All employees will stay 30 minutes extra each day to reduce ticket backlog," "All employees will attend politeness and customer support training," or "John will identify all of the simplest calls in our queue, and then I will then develop procedures by which to remove them entirely."

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Function as a Member of the Team

One important element of keeping a team of people happy is ensuring that decisions are made by the team as a whole, not by the manager alone. It may sound ludicrous, but some of the most successful teams I have seen have had some of the least directly involved managers.

In successful team environments the manager usually sets a general direction and then, for the most part, sits back and allows the team to work out the details of the implementation. If the team appears to be going off course, the manager will attempt to guide the team back in the appropriate direction.

To illustrate what I mean, let's look at two different examples of the same group. In both cases, we picture a group of about 12 people and one manager. The group is responsible for supporting all of the desktops for a small organization of standard users.

In scenario A, our manager is very involved and direct. The manager senses that the team is off course in their handling of a particular ticket. The manager walks to the front of the room and says, "OK, look folks, this is how we're going to handle this," and begins to articulate the exact course of action.

In scenario B, our manager is involved but a lot less direct. Upon sensing a deviation from the proper course, the manager keeps his peace and listens carefully to the discussion, hoping that the team will come back on course naturally. If this does not happen over some reasonable period of time, the manager asks some casual leading questions, like "What would happen if we tried solution B?" or "Has anyone asked the customer if solution C might be helpful?"

In the first scenario, the manager is setting direction, but also giving his or her staff explicit instructions on how to deliver on those requirements. This means that the staff is not really being given the opportunity to use their skills and come up with solutions on their own, but, instead, is forced to deal with solutions that are thrust upon them. As we've mentioned before, this usually makes people pretty unhappy.

In the second scenario, the manager is attempting to gently guide the team toward the solutions that he or she feels are appropriate, but not mandating that they be done one way or another. The manager is also giving the team an opportunity to disagree with his or her ideas and express that in an open forum. This allows the staff to be actively involved in the final decision, which gives them a feeling of ownership in the solution and promotes strong interest by the whole team in a successful conclusion. This will, of course, make most team members fairly happy.

Mistakes Are OK

Are you perfect? If you said yes, please re-read the section on management perfection and consider seeking counseling. No one is perfect, and everyone makes mistakes. I like to keep a list of my biggies handy to remind me of how hilariously flawed I truly am. One of my favorites was the time I pushed the button that I thought would shut down the one server I was working on, and it turned out to be the button to the UPS that powered 13 production servers. Boy, that server room got really quiet all of a sudden. Um . . . oops?

The point is that this is OK. Sure, it certainly hurt, and if I managed to do it again, or even worse, three times in a row, well, then I probably would deserve some harsh words and possibly having some responsibilities removed . . . like perhaps that of having fingers with which to shut down servers. However, my manager at the time simply laughed, said "Oops," and told me that it was OK and not to worry about it. Further,

when one of the senior VPs came down from his office looking to have my head on a platter, my manager calmly explained to the enraged individual that we were sorry but that these things happen.

Of course, I was extremely happy that my manager was so supportive and understanding – especially when I was basically expecting to lose my job over the incident.

Many people are punished for things that they do wrong. The end result is that people are typically afraid to try. The analogy I like to use is that of a small child learning how to color in a coloring book. What do you think would happen if you stood over the child and barked at them when they used the wrong color, or perhaps colored outside the lines? After a very short period of time, the child would become frustrated and upset, and might never try coloring again for fear of being chastised. Their trust in you would certainly be lessened, and they would be unlikely to try anything beyond what they already knew was acceptable to you. This would lead to further unhappiness, because the child would be unable to grow and flourish.

While your employees are certainly not children, and it's likely that what they are doing is a bit more complicated than coloring in a coloring book, this principle remains the same. If your employees are deathly afraid of making mistakes for fear of retribution, then they are not likely to be able to work very efficiently – in many cases, they may think of a very clever solution for a complex problem, but be scared to try it lest they make a mistake and incur your wrath. Ultimately, your employees will feel crippled and unable to do the things they need to in order to do a good job.

Another interesting twist on this is that managers should be willing to accept that their employees are going to make choices that may very well be the wrong ones. In most cases, the manager will certainly try and redirect the employee to a more appropriate solution, but the worker may still see it differently and want to proceed as they have suggested. In these cases the manager should seriously consider allowing the employee to go ahead with his or her plans, despite even the most assured failure. (Obviously, one would need to use some discretion here – I wouldn't allow anyone to do anything that would cause a nuclear meltdown, but a woefully failure-bound filing system might not do too much damage.)

This may seem a bit crazy, but consider the possible outcomes. If the employee fails as the manager has predicted, then he or she will likely learn a lesson, fix the problem, and move on. Or he or she will have a success to be proud of. In either case, you have allowed the employee to extend wings and fly a bit, and you will enjoy the person's gratitude. By the way, if one comes by to jokingly rub your nose in it, accept it graciously — after all, this time you *were* wrong.

Know Your Place

Are you a manager, or an individual contributor? Some people are actually both. Some of those who fill both roles are doing it because it is appropriate and necessary – often in smaller teams. Others are doing it because they can't let go and are far too involved in things that are outside their job scope.

It is very important that you do your job, not the job of your staff. If you are managing 16 people and are sitting in on conversations where you are regularly and actively driving technical decisions, then there is a very good chance that you are butting in where you should not be.

For example, my team is currently working on deploying customer-configurable installations of over 12 different complex Web-hosting technologies. There is no way, as a manager of roughly 20 people, that I can possibly understand all the nuances of

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one of these technologies, let alone 12. I spend the majority of my time working on staffing and personnel issues, budgets, presentations, scheduling, coordination with other teams, and general direction of my staff.

I simply don't have time to work much on the technologies anymore, and even if I did, the time would be much better spent improving my ability to manage the team. I should, and do, read books on team building, attend project management and employee compensation training, and even write articles to encapsulate and solidify my feelings and ideas on the subject.

The point is that if you feel the need to decide and do everything yourself, then why bother hiring all those capable people? You worked very hard to find and employ those people because they have particular skills and qualities that make them ideal to work in your organization. Lean on them – harness their skills and abilities to get the job done. It will make you a better manager, make your team feel more appreciated, and reduce frustration because your far more technically astute staff will not have to spend most of their time dealing with your simple mistakes and really dumb questions.

Remember from Whence You Came

Most managers were once people working in the front lines. Very few managers remember this. Personally, I have been a retail clerk at a software store, a pet store, a donut shop, and a hardware store. I have been a summer camp counselor, and a software developer, and I have even run my own very small software company. I was a nanny for a couple of years, and eventually I got my first out-of-college technology job as a field service technician. From there I went on to work as a desktop and server support person, went into management of an engineering support team, became a consultant for a year or so, and finally wound up where I am now, as a manager of an engineering team.

I have learned things from each and every one of these jobs that I use in my daily life, and I always try very hard to remember what it was like to be in the jobs I had before. Why is this valuable?

First and foremost, it reminds me that I am no different or better than anyone else. I know that I was not born a manager, and I know that my being here is only through a personal desire to change my focus from technical to managerial.

Second, it enables me to remember what all my managers did that I did not like. I remember the manager who didn't understand anything about what I did, but insisted that he be involved in every decision and wasted my time forcing me to explain every aspect of the technology to him. I remember the manager who wouldn't let me spend $30 to attend a training course so I could continue to bill our customers, but spent $150 on a speaker system for the graphics designer who had yet to produce a single cent for the company. I remember the manager who yelled at me for half an hour when I delivered a load of sheetrock to the wrong house. I remember many, many things that made me very unhappy, and it helps me to ensure that I don't do those things to my team.

Finally, it helps me to remember the things that a few of my managers did that really made me happy and gave me a lot of motivation. I remember the manager of the software store, who bought me lunch at the local sub shop every day and encouraged me to put together a plan to sell some tough-to-move merchandise, despite the fact that I was only 14. I remember when my boss took us all to Riverside for a day in the middle of the week because he thought we were working extremely hard and needed a break. I remember when my boss gave me a $3000 bonus out of the blue because he felt I was doing a really good job. I remember when one boss sent me home at 2 p.m. and told

me not to come back for a couple of days because I had worked over the weekend to solve a really critical problem and he felt I really deserved it. I remember many things that I try to emulate in my day-to-day management of people because I know how it made me feel about my job and I want my staff to feel the same way.

Delegate and Promote Responsibility

As a manager, you cannot and should not do it all. It is inappropriate and foolhardy to think otherwise. Therefore, it is important to identify tasks and responsibilities that other team members can take on for you. This delegation can be as simple as assigning someone to monitor tickets, and as complicated as having someone serve in a "team lead" role, handling personnel-related issues for particular members of your staff.

Doing this fulfills two very important requirements. First, delegation ensures that you are not overwhelmed and are therefore able to more effectively do your job. After all, if you are so busy that you are not even able to read through all of your email or answer your phone messages, you are very likely to be out of sync with some very important developments in your corporation. Needless to say, the better you can do your job, the happier your staff is likely to be.

Second, it gives members of your staff responsibilities that will challenge them and allow them to grow, both personally and professionally. This is very motivating, as it shows not only that you have faith and confidence in your employees but also that you are giving them something which will look great on their resume. (Sorry, but when you work in the technology industry, it seems that most things really boil down to how good this or that will look on your resume, which is usually updated monthly.)

It is important to understand that the key here is to delegate, not abdicate. The difference is that in delegation, you assign the responsibility and work with the person as is appropriate and necessary to ensure that the efforts end in success. When you abdicate something, you basically dump it on the person, wish him or her luck, and disappear – only to show up again to smack the person for doing a bad job. Abdication is extremely poor behavior on any manager's part, and horribly distressing for the employee.

Also remember that it is important not to thrust delegated responsibilities on someone but, rather, to find people who would like to do such things and to be sure that they understand the particulars of the role. Forcing new roles upon people can sometimes cause a lot of stress and unhappiness.

Don't Complain to Your Team

This is a tough lesson to learn, especially if you are friendly with your team, as I am. This can be particularly difficult if you also happen to be a somewhat emotional creature, as many people are. Things happen in our day-to-day lives as managers that are very frustrating, and sometimes completely nerve-racking: for example, tough conversations with your manager about what you can and cannot provide for your team, or the looming possibility of someone breaking up your team and scattering the people to the four winds.

It is important to remember that you really need to keep your emotions and a lot of this information to yourself. If you start complaining that the team is going to be broken into pieces long before you know for sure that it will, your staff is going to become extremely concerned and that will severely affect everything that they do. Or if you

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complain continually about your boss, they will feel like you have no support above you, which means that you are going to be ineffective in keeping the team on track.

Certainly don't hide important information from your staff – just remember where and when it is appropriate to share, and always keep in mind the potential impact of said sharing.

Hold the Shield; Wave the Banner

Always remember that your team is a group of capable, intelligent people whom you trust and respect. As a manager, you will constantly have members of your team and their actions questioned and judged by outsiders. This kind of thing is very upsetting to people, especially if it is unchecked.

Certainly, don't be blind to the possibility that your team has in some way failed, but always be sure to defend your team and its reputation against attacks from other groups and individuals. Stand calmly and firmly in the way of derisory remarks and explain to the commenter that while you certainly could be wrong, you're pretty certain that your team handled the issue appropriately. Be sure to check with your team and understand what happened, of course. If something did happen, then do your best to remedy it, but always assume that they did it the right way first – especially in the face of contempt.

Also be certain to tout your team's successes. Raise the banner of victory high in front of those who may care and do a little minor flaunting. Be sure not to go overboard here, or you will come across as being very phony, and possibly even insulting to other teams that are not nearly as amazing as yours. However, it is important to highlight the team's successes so that they feel appreciated for what they've done. They work very hard, and a little genuine recognition goes a long way.

So how did you do? Did you find that you are doing many of these things, some of them, or none of them? Perhaps you think I'm completely wrong about everything and have no idea what I'm talking about.

Regardless of whether or not you feel I am correct, consider trying the following exercise: Spend some time going over the list of Management 101 principles. If you have not done so already, think hard about which of these principles you follow and which you do not. Consider how your actions have been successful or unsuccessful. Try to identify the reasons why you think this is so. Further, try to identify some methods that I did not list but that you have successfully used in your organization. Identify why this has been a positive experience for your employees. Write all of this information down and keep it handy for when you read my next article.

In addition, create a short bulleted list of the principles that you feel you would like to work on. Print this list out and keep a copy taped on your wall – preferably where you can see it and your employees cannot. Review it regularly and ask yourself constantly if you are making any improvements. Pay careful attention to changes you see happening in your team as a result.

If you do all of these things and keep practicing, you will be ready for my next article, which will address some of the more advanced and varied points of keeping your team happy and employed in your organization. Good luck!