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PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Give Yourself

Permission *to Manage*



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Give Yourself Permission *to*

Go ahead, try it

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The authors share studied observations on leadership and management from their combined 60+ years in local government administration.

All managers want to be great leaders—and they need to be. But they also need to be great managers. In this article, readers will be reminded that:

- › Management is not a dirty word.
- › Management is critical to effective local government.
- › Managers need a system to manage.

Employee empowerment. Collaborative decision making. Servant leadership. These are the leadership buzzwords of contemporary management. With each of these phrases, a manager is provided a mental picture of how a good leader leads an organization.

These phrases describe styles that are effective and important for managers to adapt to their own settings. We cannot, however, use them or anything else as an excuse not to manage. Our profession is, after all, local government management.

The goal of management and the role of the manager are to achieve a balance between ensuring day-to-day services are provided by employees, and creating the optimal environment. The common denominator of all the approaches to leadership and management is to create an organization that attracts talented employees and leads to high performance and quality services.

As local government managers and advisers, we have seen managers being apologetic about doing just that—managing the organization. They are concerned about being labeled micromanagers because they ask questions about operations. They have been told to focus their attention on building relationships, and they interpret that mandate as requiring them to be soft and hands-off.

In fact, one of the most important keys to effective leadership and management is to ask the right questions. Although the manager may not need or want to be obsessively detail oriented, it is important that others in the organization are.

In our interaction with managers and as managers ourselves, we help managers implement contemporary leadership principles, but, at the same time, we urge managers not to abdicate their responsibility to manage the organization. Consider this to be your permission slip to be the manager again.

The Challenge of Beginning

It is a daunting task to decide to change how the organization has (or has not) been managed. New and tenured managers face similar hurdles when they decide to implement a management system. The challenge is the same, but the nuances can be different.

Some new managers come in from the outside, and no one in the organization really knows them or how they work. Some have been inside the organization for a while, and they move into the top seat and must take over the leadership role.

Regardless of where they came from, new managers can be reluctant to implement management systems because they do not want to be labeled as having a command-and-control style or appear to be top-down managers.

As a result, they focus their attention on current issues and whatever is brought to them. Period. Unfortunately, in such a situation the manager is abdicating responsibility for leadership by letting someone else set the agenda and define the strategic direction of the organization.

Managers who have been in the organization for a long time have

Manage

to clear a special hurdle when they try to implement new management systems. People who have worked with a manager for a while often put up all kinds of roadblocks to adapting to a new system.

They are likely to know what issues to bring, as well as what not to bring, to the manager. They will play to this because it is human nature to turn other people's attention to what they want that person—in this case, the boss—to focus on. Then the boss will stay away from the details! In these situations, the manager continues to be sidetracked by issues and has a hard time getting down to the business of managing the organization.

Let's face it. Every manager has a bigger job than can be done in a reasonable workweek and can spend time bouncing from one hot issue to another, whether it is a controversial rezoning, a difficult personnel issue, or a new council that must be trained, oriented, and understood.

If it isn't the managers in your organization lining up outside your door with issues that must be dealt with, it is members of the governing body, citizens, customers, members of the chamber of commerce, or an assistant who knows about an otherwise quiet issue in which the manager should intervene. These are the important things your days are made of, and in many ways they are what makes the job of managing local governments fun—or at least not boring!

But what percentage of your fleet is out of service during a given week? What is the time lost due to injury or sick leave in your sanitation operation? Where on the critical path is the newest stormwater detention facility capital project? In what direction is the crime rate headed?

And while we're on the topic, how is staff turnover? What is the average condition of your streets? How long does it take to issue a check to a vendor? What is the accuracy rate of payroll checks? How much does it cost to issue a payroll check? How many of your building inspectors are certified by the International Building Code (IBC)?

How can the manager possibly be expected to know answers to detailed questions like this? That is why we pay our department heads (or assistants) six figures, right?

Wrong.

The job of the manager is to manage the business of the organization. While any one of these measures may not be important at any given moment, the reality is that you must have a corporate system for ensuring that important measures of effectiveness and efficiency get to the top. Such a system allows the manager to monitor the results of the organization and ensure that the day-to-day work of the organization is focused on the local government's strategic objectives and long-term goals.

Managers must know the status of key projects. If they do not, they will be trapped managing issues when things go wrong instead of addressing performance trends before they become a crisis.

You cannot allow yourself to be consumed by issues and forget that you must actively manage the big-picture organization. The business of government is focused on two key things: operational (program) performance and project management. Addressing urgent issues is important, but no more important than ensuring every department is operating as efficiently and effectively as it should.

In his book, *Good to Great*, author

Jim Collins describes Level 5 leadership as being critical for helping companies break through from good to great. What is unique about Collins's leadership model is that he has specifically defined Level 5 leadership as one of five specific skill sets the leader must accomplish. And in order to be a Level 5 leader, you must also be skilled at levels 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Level 3 in Collins's hierarchy is being a competent manager. What Collins reinforces is that great leaders are also great managers! Management is about structure and discipline. It is not about fads and trends. It is management that gives an organization the stability and consistency it needs to thrive. Management is not delegated by great leaders; it is encouraged, supported, and, above all, practiced by them.

So how do you do it? How do you stay on top of the operations without being labeled a top-down, directing micromanager? It isn't easy, but it can be done by imposing rigor and discipline in your schedule and the schedules of those who work with you.

You need three systems in place to do this effectively.

1. A system for managing organizational performance through individual work plans.
2. A system for managing key projects.
3. A discipline of structured, regular one-on-one meetings between you and your direct reports.

Managing Organizational Performance

The everyday business of what our organizations do happens at a program level. We pick up trash, we fill vacancies, we conduct inspections, we immunize people, we provide after-school child care, and we provide introductory ballet courses. Each of these activities is part of

the programs that feed into our organizational hierarchy. These programs provide the building blocks for a system of managing performance.

Our program managers track “things”—how many people sign up for ballet, get flu shots, and apply for jobs. The workload data exist. The job of a manager is to translate the workload data into measures of efficiency and effectiveness that are shared up the organizational hierarchy.

Sounds simple, but it is not so easy to do! At each level of the organization, knowledge of the detailed data required to manage decreases. But there is a need-to-know key indicator of organizational performance. Usually, the information the manager needs to know relates directly to the organization’s strategic plan or the governing body’s goals and objectives.

Organizations should have a system for reporting information up through the organization and a system for discussing that information. If management doesn’t pay attention to the details, who will? Nothing will be communicated until there is a problem.

There should be a clear hierarchy of operational data that is tracked by all levels in the organization. While the city or county manager reviews performance measures and reports from all departments at a strategic level, program managers monitor operational performance at a much more detailed level.

Project Tracking

The same type of information is important to know about projects. Many governing bodies care only about high-profile projects, and maybe you have figured out a way to keep informed of those.

How about the rest of the projects? How did the rollout of the new financial management system go? Are employees happy with it? Did they get the training they needed? Is it performing as advertised? What about the new skate park? Is it on schedule, on budget?

Management must pay attention to project performance, big as well as small projects. You need to know who is accountable for executing a project plan. The manager needs to know what projects are progressing according to plan, what projects are

starting to go off course, and what projects require immediate redirection.

The bottom line is that the agreed work and metrics need to be written down and discussed at routine management meetings. After you reach agreement, you can collaborate about the execution of the agreement.

Meetings with Direct Reports

The most effective way to ensure that people within the organization communicate thoroughly and usefully about both projects and programs is to have routine, structured meetings where you review operational performance issues, project management information, and hot issues happening in the department. The one-on-one meeting between manager and department head, department head and division head, and division head and program manager is where management happens in an organization.

What about weekly staff meetings? These meetings are wonderful for sharing information and for collaboratively strategizing about issues of organizationwide importance. They are not, however, how the business of the organization is managed. City and county managers must lead and manage their organizations and ensure that their subordinates are managing their departments.

Best-practice organizations have a consistent methodology for managing in every department. Sure, styles differ, and some departments require more or fewer one-on-one meetings, but the fact of the matter is that they all do require them. It is a matter of setting the proper procedures in place to ensure a productive and meaningful dialogue. Such regular meetings provide the opportunity to review work plans and project schedules, to review data on operational trends, and to track progress toward strategic objectives.

Permission to Manage

So yes, collaborate, be a servant leader, and don’t micromanage the good people in your organization. But you do have a duty to actively manage the organization. It is your responsibility to ensure that the intended results are produced for the organization and that core services are provided in a cost-effective and efficient manner. This is similar to a private sector manager’s responsibility to track the financial bottom line.

The best organizations execute well. They invest in their people, they know where they want to go, and they have clear plans for getting there. Don’t allow pejoratives to give you an excuse to abdicate your responsibility.

Lead and manage. You have permission. **PM**



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SOURCE: *Good to Great*, management book by Jim Collins, 2001, page 20. © Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.