

The Undermanagement Epidemic: Hiding In Plain Sight

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BY BRUCE TULGAN

Since 1993, I have studied the experience of thousands of managers at all levels in a wide range of industries through workplace interviews, focus groups, polls, questionnaires, and intensive seminars. Our research confirms that—all across the workplace—there is a shocking and profound lack of daily guidance, direction, feedback, and support for staff from those who are their immediate supervisors. Too many leaders, managers, and supervisors simply do not spend enough time attending to the basics of managing staff. This is what I call “undermanagement”—the opposite of micromanagement.

Show me just about any problem in any workplace and I’ll show you a case of undermanagement. Follow the trail into the workplace, behind the scenes and—almost always—I’ll show you a manager who is to blame. I’ve spent so much time behind the scenes in so many organizations that I can tell you this: Undermanagement is costing organizations a fortune every day. It robs so many employees of the chance to have positive experiences in the workplace, reach greater success, and earn more of what they need and want. It causes managers to struggle and suffer and deliver sub-optimal results. It sours dealings with vendors and customers. And it costs society in so many ways.

Undermanagement is not a household word like micromanagement, but it should be because its impact makes micromanagement look like a mole-hill. Undermanagement is an epidemic in today’s workplace, hiding in plain sight.

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trail into the workplace, behind the scenes: What went wrong with the response to Hurricane Katrina or the failure to bolster the New Orleans levees beforehand? What went wrong with the loss of personal data of millions of veterans at the VA? Data theft from credit card companies? Jayson Blair and the “made-up news” scandal at the New York Times? Dan Rather and the “National Guard” debacle? Other corporate stars gone wild? What went wrong at Enron? Arthur Andersen? Tyco? Medical mishaps?

Pension deficits? Most airline delays? Whose job was it to make things go right? Whoever it is, that person has a boss. The boss is in charge. The boss is to blame. For what? For failing to make sure in the first place that the employees did their jobs properly.

I’ve spent so much time behind the scenes in so many organizations that I can tell you this: most problems could be avoided altogether or solved quickly by a highly engaged hands-on manager, by a boss who accepts authority and the responsibility that goes along with it. This is the boss who says, “Great news, I’m the boss! And I’m going to try really hard to be a great one!”

Unfortunately, highly engaged managers are rare. Frankly, most bosses are not so great. Many struggle to be better. Some don’t even bother to struggle. Most bosses are so hands-off they mostly don’t manage unless they absolutely must.

Why is that?

It’s Getting Harder to Manage People

It’s always been hard to manage people. Nowadays, it’s a whole lot harder to manage people. The workplace is becoming more and more high-pressure,



and the workforce is becoming more and more high maintenance. Staff members look to their immediate supervisors to meet their basic needs and expectations and freely make demands of their managers. Meanwhile, most managers, like everyone else, have more tasks and responsibilities of their own, along with more administrative duties.

Managers have to deal with the “hard” realities of managing people today:

- ▶ You cannot always hire superstars. You have to hire the best person available; and often that person is in the middle of the talent spectrum, not at the top.
- ▶ When you do hire superstars, they can be even harder to manage than the mediocre people.
- ▶ Staff members do not have the “power” to do things their own way in the workplace, and they are not free to ignore tasks they don’t like.
- ▶ Even if you set expectations clearly, sometimes staff members don’t achieve those expectations.
- ▶ Not everybody is a winner. Dealing with failure is a big part of managing.
- ▶ Staff can’t always work in the areas they enjoy most

because there is lots of work to be done, and staff are hired to do what needs to be done.

- ▶ Staff don’t always earn praise. And those who do earn praise usually want tangible rewards, not just praise.
- ▶ Somebody is in charge and staff will “be held accountable.”

Most managers still move into positions of supervisory responsibility because they are very good at something, but not usually for the reason that they are especially good at managing people. Once promoted, most new managers receive very little in the way of effective management training. What little management training managers do receive is usually dominated by the prevailing approach—what I call “the myth of empowerment.” This is the number one management myth in today’s workplace.

The Seven Great Management Myths Today

Myth of Empowerment: The way to empower people is to leave them alone and let them manage themselves. According to this myth, managers should not keep

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close track of staff and they definitely should not zero in on employee failures. Staff should be made to feel they “own” their work and should be set free to make their own decisions. Managers are merely facilitators, there to align the natural talents and desires of staff with fitting roles in the workplace. Managers should not tell people how to do their jobs, but rather let staff come up with their own methods. The idea is, make staff feel good inside and results will take care of themselves.

What is the reality? Almost everybody performs better with more guidance, direction, and support from a more experienced person. What does real empowerment look like? If you want to truly empower people, then you simply must define the terrain on which they have power. That terrain consists of effectively delegated goals, with clear guidelines and concrete deadlines. Consistently articulating with every direct report the appropriate standards and expectations—what to do and how to do it—is the hard work of leading, managing, and supervising. Within clearly articulated parameters, a direct report has power. Limited power? Yes. But it also has the great virtue of being real power.

What are the other great management myths that contribute to the undermanagement epidemic?

The Myth of Fairness: The way to be fair is to treat everybody the same. What is the reality? What’s truly fair is doing more for some people and less for others, based on what they deserve—based on their performance.

The Myth of the Nice Guy: The only way to be strong is to act like a jerk, but I want to be a “nice guy.” What is the reality? Real “nice guy” managers do what it takes to help employees succeed so those employees can deliver great service for customers and earn more rewards for themselves.

The Myth of the Difficult Conversation: Being hands-off is the way to avoid confrontations with employees. What is the reality? Being a weak manager makes these confrontations inevitable, whereas being a strong manager means these confrontations rarely occur, and when they do happen they are not so painful after all.

The Myth of Red Tape: Managers are prevented from being strong because there are so many factors beyond their control—red tape, corporate culture, senior management, limited resources. What is the reality? Focusing on the many factors that are within your control is the way to make yourself stronger. Meanwhile,

learn the rules and red tape so you learn how to work within and around them (another way to increase your strength).

Myth of the Natural Leader: I am not good at managing. What is the reality? The best managers are people—natural or not—who learn proven techniques, practice those techniques diligently until they become skills and continue practicing them until they become habits.

Myth of Time: There’s isn’t enough time to manage people. What is the reality? Since your time is so limited, you definitely don’t have time to deal with all the things that go wrong when you do not spend enough time up-front managing people. When you spend your time managing, you engage the productive capacity of the people you manage and improve the quality and output of the employee’s work for hours or days. That’s a good return on investment—that’s why I call it “high leverage time.”

Eight Steps Back to Basics

But real managers don’t operate in fantasyland. They have to deal with the “hard” realities of managing people today. Stop falling for the myth of empowerment. Leaving people alone to manage themselves is a setup for failure. Start practicing the art of true empowerment—guidance, direction and support. It’s okay to be the boss. Be a great one! Set people up for success every step of the way and help people earn what they need.

Become a strong hands-on manager. Start here with eight steps back to basics:

- ❶ Get in the habit of managing every day.
- ❷ Learn to talk like a performance coach.
- ❸ Take it one person at a time.
- ❹ Make accountability a real process.
- ❺ Tell people what to do and how to do it.
- ❻ Track performance every step of the way.
- ❼ Solve small problems before they turn into big problems.
- ❽ Do more for some people and less for others (based on what they earn).

It’s time to pull the pendulum of management back in the right direction toward real empowerment. In today’s high pressure workplace, employees need a boss who sets them up for success every step of the way and helps them earn what they need. Be the boss who says, “Great news, I’m the boss! I’m going to make sure that everything goes well around here. You can count on me.” 