

Management and the Misapplication Of Good Management Principles in Today's Businesses

By Colm McCormack. January 2009.

When Managers Become Dangerous

As human beings it is our natural tendency to take shortcuts, to formulate easy-to-follow models. Mentally, we stick labels on others and act accordingly – it is how we make sense of the world around us and the endless data that bombards our busy minds. But this short-cutting, modeling, and labeling, of course, can cause us severe problems. There is no one-fits-all rule of management: context can render a brilliant strategy useless; tragedy or distraction in personal life can instantly turn a good worker into a poor one.

In this article I want to run up a red flag for some of the common mistakes managers make due to time constraints, a failure to fully understand what they have read or learned, and the general desire to find the quick fix.

Bending Too Far

The idea that managers should now be “flexible” is something that causes problems, particularly with what I term “cowardly managers”.

Flexibility of mind, of approach, through asking questions, listening, constantly reassessing context, are all admirable. But extending flexibility – or letting it run rampant – to the point where the simple basics of your business get trampled on or ignored is dangerous. Think timekeeping, or courtesy, or customer service –

whatever applies to your particular business. The phrase, “Come and go as you like so long as you get the work done”, is becoming more common. Flexibility left unchecked is in danger of becoming abdication of managerial responsibility: there's a difference between loosening the reins and letting go completely.

Non-Stop Talking

Consulting with employees is another recent golden rule for the business world. Far too many managers, however, fail to recognize that not only can you not consult with every employee on every issue, often it is inadvisable. I have come across many managers over the years who extend the principle of consultation to talking with employees about action steps originally called for by the very employees they are talking with: cowardly management.

An unwillingness or inability to confront others often lies at the root of this particular silliness. Conflict, confrontation, and inter-personal skills generally do not feature high on the curricula of most business schools. Organizations can also be careless in who they promote, clinging to favorites and using length of service criteria.

We might therefore expect the general principle of consulting with our employees to continue its appearance in a faddish and half-baked way unless managers develop a keener sense of

context and an ability to engage, interpret, and understand people and behavior.

The Problem of Over-Communicating¹

Communication in general should also receive a mention here. Today, we have developed the dangerous tendency to communicate ourselves out of effectiveness. Far too many emails are copied to people, memos fired around at the push of a button. And you can see what's coming: employees start to switch off so when a really important item goes around it gets ignored too!

As we heard in English class so often as children: Quality *not* quantity. A manager should know what to communicate, the channel best suited for the context in which he is standing, and more.

Shifting From the Physical to the Mental

Managers often mistake the concept of managing by walking around as a physical exercise. Some view it as an opportunity to strike fear into their workers. The truth, of course, is that management by walking around is mental exertion, not physical. It requires an ability to observe, to approach employees and engage them in meaningful non-threatening conversation, to engage in active listening, and more. Walking around pointing and barking is *not* the idea at all.

¹ A full chapter is devoted specifically to Communication in the first book of the series: *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others*. See Chapter 6.

Sometimes Clones are Precisely What You Need

A manager must never be allowed to clone himself is another common principle followed by many – the idea being that too many like-minded individuals – especially unsuitable managers – can eventually lead to an organization full of the same kind of people, thinking the same kind of things, missing the same opportunities...etc. As we know, however, there are times when we *must* allow managers to clone themselves. Take, for example, a change program in an overly dull and unadventurous business. Dropping several like-minded individuals into that company – change agents – is not only desirable, it's highly advisable.

The Dark Side of Passion²

Passion is something we have all read about: its importance particularly in the worlds of entrepreneurs and innovators. But passion can also wound. We can become too determined, overly focused on the end goal oblivious to the people we are stomping over. Our passion can run away with us. Often, a determined and inspired manager becomes dismissive, overly-forceful in his communication style. He can, unwittingly, negatively impact upon the morale and confidence of those around him.

² “The Dark Side” features in: **Just Manage THEM!** *Effective People Management for Today's Manager* (book 2 in the Just Manage It! series. Go to: www.ColmMcCormack.com for further details).

We can also become so blinded by the brilliance of our ideas that we become ignorant of the changing external context: we fail to look up once in a while to make sure we are still on the right road. Again, our passion can blind us.

Diving In With Both Feet

Far too many managers read brief and dangerous coffee table-styled management books and then rush to instill the principles they contain into their businesses. There are many excellent principles and models out there – proven ones at that too – designed to aid managers. But it is the lack of what I term “Context Intelligent Managers” that casts good principles in the role of dangerous landmines.

You can’t suddenly become flexible in everything you do simply because flexibility is the latest management fad. You cannot flood the office with memos and emails just because management books and gurus are telling you that communication is now the new key success factor. And we’ve discussed other such concepts in the paragraphs above. Such principles have their time, their place, and their

application. It is far easier to apply the right principle in the wrong place than you might otherwise have thought. The result of such errors is that the manager ends up managing many unforeseen consequences that spring from such errors. Or, to put it another way, he runs the risk of making life harder for himself rather than easier.

Context Intelligent Managers

As I indicated in the opening paragraph humans are ideally built to make such errors: our mental processes spur us on through the use of short-cuts, labels, and more. I encourage you to read the first book in the “**Just Manage It!**” series - *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others* - where you will find a chapter devoted to Context Sensitivity and the creation of “Context Intelligent Managers”. You will learn about the eight factors of context you should be alert to plus the importance of time, timing, and timeliness as underlying currents to the eight context factors.



Colm McCormack has lectured in Management, Strategic Management, and Leadership on MBA and continuing education programs. He has consulted for numerous companies and Mentored business owners. He is the author of the “**Just Manage It!**” series of Business & Management books. Visit www.ColmMcCormack.com to download FREE chapters, to view key concepts and models, and to purchase Books from the series.