

What Great Managers Do Differently

Management Success

By Susan M. Heathfield, About.com Guide

Great managers break every rule perceived as “conventional wisdom,” when dealing with the selection, motivation, and development of staff. So state Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman in *First, Break All The Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Compare Prices a book which presents the findings of the Gallup organization's interviews with over 80,000 successful managers.

Most powerful about these findings about successful management is that each “great” manager was identified based upon the performance results he produced in his organization. Here are some of the key ideas discussed in the great managers book.

Additionally, I'll expand upon the human resource management and development information from the book with specific examples and recommendations. Managers and human resource management and development professionals can apply the research findings to jump start their management career success.

An Overall New Approach to Human Resource Development

The insight most commonly expressed during the interviews with 80,000 great managers challenges traditional human resource management and development beliefs. Thousands of great managers stated variations on this belief: “People don't change that much. Don't waste time trying to put in what was left out. Try to draw out what was left in. That is hard enough.” (p. 57)

The implications of this insight for training and performance development are profound. This insight encourages building on what people can already do well Instead of trying to “fix” weaker talents and abilities. The traditional performance improvement process identifies specific, average or below performance areas. Suggestions for improvement, either verbal or in a formal appraisal process, focus on developing these weaknesses.

What great managers do instead, is assess each individual's talents and skills. They then provide training, coaching, and development opportunities that will help the person increase these skills. They compensate for or manage around weaknesses.

As an example, if I employ a person who lacks people skills, a diverse group of staff members can form a customer service team that includes him. Other employees with excellent people skills make his weakness less evident. And, the organization is able to capitalize on his product knowledge when dealing with product quality issues.

Does this mean that great managers never help people improve their inadequate skills, knowledge, or methods? No, but they shift their emphasis to human resource development in areas in which the employee already has talent, knowledge, and skills.

The Four Vital Jobs for Great Managers

Buckingham and Coffman identify four twists on conventional approaches which further define the differences in tactics espoused by great managers.

- Select people based on talent.
- When setting expectations for employees, establish the right outcomes.
- When motivating an individual, focus on strengths.
- To develop an individual, find the right job fit for the person.

Select People Based on Talent

During the Gallup interviews, great managers stated that they selected staff members based on talent, rather than experience, education, or intelligence. Gallup defined “talents” by studying the talents needed to achieve in 150 distinct roles. Talents identified are:

- **striving** - (examples: drive for achievement, need for expertise, drive to put beliefs in action),
- **thinking** – (examples: focus, discipline, personal responsibility), and
- **relating** – (examples: empathy, attentiveness to individual differences, ability to persuade, taking charge).

Human Resource professionals will support line managers more effectively if they recommend methods for identifying talents such as realistic testing and behavioral interviewing . When checking background, look for patterns of talent application. (As an example, did the candidate develop every new position she ever obtained from scratch?) Here are three additional vital jobs for great managers.

When Setting Expectations for Employees, Establish the Right Outcomes

According to the book, *First, Break All The Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Compare Prices great managers assist each individual to establish goals and objectives that are congruent with the needs of the organization. They help each employee define the expected outcomes, what success will look like upon completion. Then, they get out of the way.

In my experience, most work is performed by people who are not under the constant supervision of a manager. Given this fact, it makes sense to let the employee determine the right path to walk to accomplish her objectives. She will undoubtedly choose the one that draws upon her unique talents and ability to contribute to performance. The manager will want to establish the critical path and the check points for feedback, but to micromanage the employee is a mistake. The manager will drive himself crazy and lose good people who feel he doesn't trust them.

Human Resource professional can support this approach to management by coaching managers in more participative styles. You can establish reward systems that recognize managers who develop the abilities of others to perform and produce stated outcomes. You can promote the establishment of organization-wide goals to drive performance.

When Motivating an Individual, Focus on Strengths

Great managers appreciate the diversity of the people in their work group, state Buckingham and Coffman. They recognize that “helping people become more of who they already are,” since each person has unique strengths, will best support their success.

They focus on an individual's strengths and manage around his weaknesses. They find out what motivates each staff member and try to provide more of it in his work environment. As an example, if challenge is what your staff person craves, make sure he always has one tough, challenging assignment. If your staff member prefers routine, send more repetitive work in his direction. If he enjoys solving problems for people, he may excel in front-line service.

Compensate for staff weaknesses. As an example, you can find the employee a peer coaching partner who brings strengths he may lack to an assignment or initiative. Provide training to boost skills in needed areas of performance.

Human Resources professionals can assist by problem solving with managers who seek ideas for managing around weaknesses. You can make certain individual strengths are nurtured and that people have the opportunity to use their talents in their jobs. You can design reward, recognition, compensation, and performance development systems that promote a work environment in which people feel motivated to contribute. Consider the advice of the book's great managers who recommend, **"spend the most time with your best people."**

Find the Right Job Fit for Each Person

A manager's job is not to help every individual he employs grow. His job is improving performance. To do this, he has to identify whether each employee is in the right role. Additionally, he needs to work with each person to determine what "growing in his role," and thus his ability to contribute to performance within the organization, means.

For some people, this may mean reaching for a promotion; for others, it means expanding the current job. Traditionally, people felt the only growth in the work place was "up" the promotional ladder. This is no longer true, and I doubt if it was ever best practice thinking. Buckingham and Coffman state, "create heroes in every role." Remember *The Peter Principle* (Compare Prices), a book which maintains that individuals are promoted to their level of incompetence?

The Human Resource professional must maintain a thorough understanding of positions and needs across the organization, to help each individual experience the right job fit. Familiarize yourself with the talents and capabilities of each person in your organization. Keep excellent documentation of testing, job applications, performance appraisals, and performance development plans.

Develop a promotion and hiring process which supports placing people in positions that "fit." Establish career development opportunities and succession plans that emphasize "fit" over experience and longevity.

As a Human Resources professional, if you can assist the managers and supervisors in your organization to understand and apply these concepts, you'll help create a successful organization of strong, talented contributing people. And, isn't that the type of workplace you'd like for yourself as well?