

CAN YOU MANAGE?

Being a manager isn't easy, particularly if you're new to the job, and even the best managers must commit themselves to lifelong learning. Stewart Forsyth checks out two scenarios where learning pays off.



Micro managing

Some of our staff are complaining that their manager constantly checks up on them and doesn't let them make any decisions for themselves. She disputes this. How can we resolve this issue?

It sounds like you are in the middle of a conflict. This probably isn't a comfortable place to be, but with a bit of direct talking you might be able to help to get the manager back managing.

First, collect some information. What can you learn about how the manager manages? You also need to learn more about the team. What is their history? Particularly, what did they learn about communication and autonomy from their previous manager? What is their current culture? Are they used to responsible autonomy or free-wheeling anarchy?

Second, talk some more with the manager. Ask her for some examples of supervision. How has it gone recently? Go for specific examples and challenge 'text-book' and 'should-dos' type answers. Confront her with any solid evidence that there is a difference between what she holds out as the ideal and what she does (maybe in some specific situations, such as under pressure).

Ask her if she would be happy with you facilitating a meeting with the team. Make it clear that she is the person who decides the style and culture of the team, within the boundaries

your organisation has around positive communication. Ask her if she is prepared to try some changes to her style.

Offer to support any changes (you might be the coach, or you might be able to get her training or coaching support). Encourage her to use her listening and empathy skills in the meeting—so that her staff feel they have been listened to.

If the manager is comfortable with the idea of a meeting, catch up with the staff. Make it clear to the staff that you can try to get communication up and going, but you can't be the transmission link. Are they happy with you facilitating a meeting to work on building communication with their manager? Are they prepared to change the way they do things?

Give them some clues if you think they will need to make changes. Offer to help them rehearse describing their concerns before meeting with their manager. Help them to define the particular supervisor behaviours they find disempowering.

In the meeting encourage open communication, and clear statements from the manager about how she will attempt to supervise in the future. Encourage a follow-up process—you talking with each of them separately in a week, for example.

Send the manager and staff an email confirming the communication expectations and follow-up. Check them out on the due date. When you follow

up make sure that they focus on the target communication behaviour, rather than sliding to another issue. Get acknowledgement of change, and make the point that learning new ways of doing things takes practice, and is hard under pressure.

State your intention to leave them to it if there is agreement of positive change. Suggest a follow-up meeting if people feel nothing has changed.

Teaching the basics

I'm thinking of setting up an 'HR101' course for first time managers to teach them the basics of supervision. What would you include in such a course? We run an online survey (www.survey.fxc.co.nz) that covers a range of transformational and performance leadership behaviours. A recent analysis of the results from over 150 respondents to this survey has helped to identify the links between leadership behaviours and important outcomes.

Transformational leadership, for example, encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questioning assumptions, while performance leadership provides accurate and comprehensive feedback.

Those people who see their leaders using these transformational and performance leadership behaviours tend to also report that they are strongly committed to their organisation and perform at high levels.

The essential coaching or

supervisory skill seems to be combining feedback about performance along with suggestions and support for development.

It is difficult to learn to use such skills from a magazine or book. Skill development is more likely if based on observation of skilled models, together with ongoing practice and feedback. A mix of training and coaching is usually the most effective way to enhance these skills.

A course needs to also include information about how to develop a performance culture in the team or group. This is about establishing the processes so that people do see the links between effort, performance and rewards. Innovative research by Keith Macky (presented to a 2004 IOSIG) indicates that Kiwi workers need to see and believe some key things before the organisation gains their commitment:

- Promotion processes are fair;
- There is regular and constructive feedback on performance;
- Employees are involved in decision-making on things that matter;
- Performance appraisals are accurate.

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