

## Effective Managers Are Not in Control

IF, IN ALL of life, paradox is the rule and not the exception, as I believe it is, then the popular view of management as essentially a matter of gaining and exercising control is badly in need of correction. Management based on techniques of control and manipulation cannot succeed in matters of the absurd. But that hardly means that the manager is lost.

Only those who rely mainly on control are lost.

In my experience, effective leaders and managers do not regard control as the main concern. Instead, they approach situations sometimes as learners, sometimes as teachers, sometimes as both. They turn confusion into understanding. They see a bigger picture. They trust the wisdom of the group. Their strength is not in control alone, but in other qualities—passion, sensitivity, tenacity, patience, courage, firmness, enthusiasm, wonder.

### **The Vulnerability Requirement**

Absurdly, our most important human affairs—marriage, child rearing, education, leadership—do best when there is occasional *loss* of control and an increase in personal vulnerability, times when we do not know what to do.

To explain, let me make clear that I'm not talking about some continuing condition of management passivity or hand-wringing. Nor am I suggesting that managers should fail to act, to exercise their authority or to follow their own good judgment. But people need to know they are dealing with a genuine person, not someone who is "managing" them. Again, it has to do with the inappropriateness of technique.

Think of the difference between seduction and romance. Technique is required for the former but is useless in the latter. Being vulnerable, out of control, buffeted about by the experience, pained at any separation, aching for the next encounter, wild with jealousy, soaring with ecstasy, and plummeting with anxiety—all these are what make it a romance. If you know how to have a romance, it isn't a romance, but a seduction. Not knowing how to do it makes it a romance.

Managers think the people with whom they work want them to exhibit consistency, assertiveness, and self-control—and they do, of course. But occasionally, they also want just the opposite. They want a moment with us when we are genuinely ourselves without facade or pretense or defensiveness, when we are revealed as human beings, when we are vulnerable.

This is true not just in leadership but in every human situation. It's what wives want from husbands, what children want from parents, what we all want from each other. It's what most arguments and conflicts are unconsciously designed to produce: to get us to reveal that the other has had an impact on us.

### **An Idea Misapplied?**

Residents of countries outside the United States find rather bewildering the distinctly American idea that the conduct of human relations is basically a matter of finding the right

technique. They are amazed and sometimes amused by the self-help psychology books, advice columns, marriage manuals, parent training classes, and motivational videotapes that dominate our popular culture. They think we have misapplied the idea of technology, and have taken it places where it doesn't belong.

Perhaps they are right. It does seem impossible for American managers, and others of us as well, to resist the tendency to translate understanding into technique. When we begin to understand how something works, we think immediately that we will be able to make it work. That may be true in the physical world, but it is far from true in the world of human relations.

Knowing how people grow, for example, does not mean we know how to grow them. Experts in child development are no better than anyone else at raising their own children. Moreover, it should be evident to anyone who is acquainted with psychologists or psychiatrists that knowing about human relationships does not necessarily mean that we are any better at conducting them; indeed, knowing about them may be an impediment.

In some fundamental sense, we cannot learn how to have relationships, how to raise children, how to lead others—how to be human, if you will. Why? Because to a great extent it is the very condition of not knowing, of being vulnerable to and surprised by life, of being unable to manage or control our lovers, our children, or our colleagues, that makes us human.

### **A Blessing**

I used to want to know how to handle my children, my employees, my students, my friends. Now it is a great relief to me to realize that I cannot. Nor, I believe, can anyone else. I especially cannot handle the people I love most. The

prospect of such an achievement now appalls me; instead, I think of it as a blessing that I, and we, will never learn.

Many of us have the idea that as managers we can use our skills to shape our employees as if we were shaping clay, molding them into what we want them to become. But that isn't the way it really works. It's more as if our employees are piles of clay into which we fall—leaving an impression, all right, and that impression is distinctly us, but it may not be the impression we intended to leave.

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## The Best Resource for the Solution of Any Problem Is the Person or Group That Presents the Problem

EX-CONVICTS ARE BETTER able to rehabilitate prison inmates than is the prison staff. Ex-drug addicts are more successful in getting other addicts off drugs than are psychiatrists. Students learn more from each other than they do from their professors. People tend to be much smarter about their own situations than we give them credit for. After all, a full grasp of any problem is only in the hands of the people who have experienced it.

In the early 1940s when Carl Rogers claimed that people with problems might be in the best position to know what to do about them, the professional world responded with disbelief and ridicule. How could the very people who were suffering from a problem know how to solve it? This idea was heresy to professionals trained to think that problems could be solved only by bringing to bear their own analytic ability and therapeutic skills.

But this idea has since gained acceptance in practically every professional area, including management. It is not practiced uniformly of course, because sometimes experts can help, and people are not always the best judges of their

own situations. Nevertheless, Rogers's belief, which at one time seemed absurd, now has wide currency.

Community planners, for example, recognize the efficacy of involving the people for whom the plans are being made in each stage of the process. It leads not only to wider acceptance of a plan but improves it, because these people often have a keen awareness of issues that professionals have not fully assessed.

The clearest validation of this approach is the proliferation of self-help groups. Alcoholics Anonymous, the most famous of these groups that meet without professional leadership, clearly has a better record of keeping people away from alcohol than the professions dedicated to that effort. There are now thousands of self-help organizations reaching many millions of people, ranging from Weight Watchers to Parents Without Partners to Gamblers Anonymous. Each of them demonstrates the power of people who are themselves beset with the problems and yet are able to help each other in ways that the professionals have not yet learned to do.

We can rely on people in this way because within all of us lies a mastery of roles that we rarely if ever play, each requiring complex skills we have somehow learned through the natural course of our lives. That is the basic reason why managers can become effective even though they may never have had a day of formal training. They already know how.

### **Widely Approved, Seldom Practiced**

Participative management—involving the people who have to do the work in the decisions that will affect them—is based upon the idea that people are better than we think they are and can be counted on to make wise choices. A considerable amount of research shows that people learn faster, produce more, and are more highly motivated when participative methods are employed. The challenge for management is how to tap this powerful resource. No one knows

the ceiling of performance when the proper expectations are introduced and the appropriate social architecture is in place.

But here is another paradox: While the participative approach is widely agreed to be effective, it is seldom put into practice. Companies experiment with it, but few employ participative management in a continuing organization-wide manner. Why is that so? One answer, of course, is that managers do not like to demean their own expertise by assuming that the group can do it better. But there are other reasons, too.

Participative management depends on trusting the group. Most managers simply don't have that confidence and can't take the time to develop that trust. Even when groups are consulted, they don't always believe in themselves and so may resist the idea of involvement. And let's face it, it can take an inordinate amount of time and patience to develop a group that can practice participative management. One must have the patience of a saint to sit through meetings where the group may spend thirty minutes talking about the coffee machine.

Companies also stumble by pursuing participative management ideas that are overly simplistic and do not acknowledge the complexities of organizational behavior. Many companies fail to recognize that the participative approach requires a somewhat different leader who is tuned in to the undercurrents and the hidden agendas that accompany any meeting.

Finally, managers who experiment with participative methods open themselves up to abuse. Groups that are testing their leaders' ability to hear what they are saying or to accept their ideas can humiliate the leaders by resisting attempts to evoke participation. In such situations, managers who try to elicit ideas often become the focus of the group's complaints. Sometimes there even is open hostility.

Mary Douglas, the noted British anthropologist, once explained to me that participative systems are importantly dif-

ferent from hierarchical systems not just in the way that risks are assessed and decisions made, but also in the ways people are treated. The introduction of highly participative systems tends to bring attacks on the stronger members, often the leaders, while more hierarchical systems bring attacks on the weaker members.

I remember consulting at a university in which the provost of one of the colleges was committed to a participative approach. All matters that needed deciding were brought before the students and faculty. The entering freshmen were impressed that they could express themselves so freely, that they could challenge the provost, even use obscenities with him and get away with it. It was so exhilarating to the young people that they neglected to appreciate the debilitating effect on the provost. Each incoming class would go through somewhat the same ritual, testing and abusing the leader. Over a period of a couple of years, I witnessed the gradual wearing down of the provost, who had undertaken the experiment with unbridled energy and enthusiasm. He resigned his post in the third year, and the program reverted to a traditional form.

### **Conserving the Human Resources**

That experience was one of many that led me to take what I would call a *conservation of resources* approach to consulting with groups. I now tend to begin my consultation by asking the group to identify its most valuable resources—typically, human resources, usually the group leader and the most creative individuals in the group. Then I explore with the group the ways these resources could be protected, enhanced, and conserved.

More often than not, the group will realize on its own that these individuals require expressions of appreciation, recognition, even some deference. The group itself will often come up with ways to respect the special needs of these



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individuals—for example, understanding that at times they need to be able to close their doors or to work unusual hours. Instead of complaining about the leadership styles, work habits, or idiosyncrasies of its colleagues, the group designs ways to accommodate them. The process provides a foundation on which to build discussions of more fundamental issues.