Managing in the New Team Environment

Skills, Tools, and Methods

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To Marla, my wife, in love,
and to her father and mother, Mac and Doris,
for their unstinting generosity

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Introduction

In today's economic environment, you the manager depend more than ever on the team of people you manage. New products, new equipment, new procedures, and new reporting relationships command your attention. You can no longer go it alone, keep control of all the details, have all the good ideas, manage all the key relationships, and use your team to simply execute your orders. If you think you can, you are probably overworked and unproductive.

But if you want to step back, to rely on others, to get out from under the press of one detail after another, how do you know you can trust those you supervise? Can you risk depending on them and hope that they will come through? How do you know they are loyal, knowledgeable, and effective? How can you get them to help each other so that they can ultimately help you? How do you give them needed direction without interfering in their work? How do you lead without directing, and give elbow room without abdicating? How can you appraise and reward their good performance when you have little control over their salary levels? If you expect and get much from them, what do you owe them politically and emotionally? And, finally, as you build your team, how do you ensure that the individuals within it don't get "lost in the crowd"? How can you be each individual's boss while also supporting the team's autonomy?

Team settings challenge your skills as a manager. A factory manager, responsible for the performance of a self-managing team, was worried about its performance. Eager to support its autonomy, he did not know how to confront the team directly. Instead, he told the team "moderator" (a team member who facilitated group meetings) that "whichever team member was qualified in a production skills group where there is a problem should help out ... regardless of their assignment." This puzzled team members, because they were already helping one another out. Was the manager asking team

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members to specialize in a few jobs rather than rotate assignments as they were allowed to do? A few days later the manager sent a supervisor back to the team, but called him a consultant. One worker responded, "He says he is a consultant, but I know he'll behave like a manager."

What was going on here? The manager was afraid of being direct. Believing that to promote his team's autonomy he had to withhold his thoughts and feelings he was compelled to communicate indirectly. He "softened" the team up, watched their response, and when they failed to improve performance, he sent in a boss, while calling him a consultant. The manager was confused about how to take authority in a team environment, about how to be responsible in his job without undermining the role and authority of team members. Ironically, by being indirect, by trying to protect the workers' "feelings" and self-esteem, he appeared manipulative instead.[1]

Managers used to unilateral authority become confused with the problems of being aggressive, of saying no when they mean it when managing in a team setting. As one worker noted, "Participation means 'guess what is on my mind.'" Another, reflecting on the process of giving input to managers, said, "An answer of 'no' to a suggestion always begins with the phrase, 'But are you sure you have considered these additional factors.'"[2] Moreover, in managing this dilemma some managers simply abdicate. One plant manager of a large, 3,000-member electronics plant faced very complicated strategic and operational issues. He introduced a just-in-time system; he eliminated the punch clock and the time-and-motion group; he worked to integrate customer services, production control, and operations. Facing significant stress, the plant community needed his leadership. Yet, in addressing a large group of managers and supervisors, he noted that while he once thought he was their coach he now considered himself to be their cheerleader. The metaphor was compelling. Just when he was pushing the factory to transform itself, to be more self-managing while also developing new relationships

1. J. Maxwell Eden, "Democracy at Work for a More Participatory Politics," University of California, Los Angeles, 1979, pp. 239–240.

2. John Witte, *Democracy, Authority, and Alienation at Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 119.

among its divisions and departments, he was going to step to the side.

Indeed, caught by the challenge of saying both "yes" and "no" in new ways, of affirming both the teams' and their own authority, many managers oscillate between the dictatorial "no" and the abdicating "yes." Describing a plant manager in charge of a self-managing team system, one coordinator noted, "He oscillated between being participative and being a little Caesar. He did not know how to lead in a plant based on the team concept."

This book is designed to help manage these tensions and cope with these complexities. Based on an interactive video course developed at IBM, it takes you step-by-step through the process of building your team and authorizing team members to act, while you learn to step back and delegate.

If you are like many managers schooled in the old ways and socialized in conventional company settings, you've probably internalized one command without question: *"Stay in control."* This powerful command and its associated dictums ("When you don't know, don't ask," "Don't look weak") may have worked in the days when you could master all the details of your unchanging job, when subordinates expected and wanted their managers to know it all, when people never questioned authority, and when paternalistic companies protected their employees in exchange for their unquestioning loyalty.

But the world of work has changed. You need to leave this "control orientation" behind and take what this book describes as the "learner role." In taking the learner role, you will become not only a more effective manager but also a more effective subordinate and colleague. As you learn to be a learner, your capacity to acquire knowledge and enroll others in your work and interests will grow dramatically. But as the book also shows, taking the learner role creates risks and entails work. The book will help you prepare for these risks and do this work so that as you promote your team's development you are fostering your own as well.

In the past, you could rely on common sense, your instincts, and your familiarity with your team members to manage in a team environment. But just as companies need more sophisticated financial-tracking mechanisms to control money flows as they grow, you too need new techniques to keep the team process on track and ensure that empowered individuals are harnessed to the team effort. The rest of this book is geared to teach you the techniques for

managing in a team environment. They range from tools designed to help groups solve problems to methods of observation and tips on intervention when you are facilitating a team discussion. But if you try to apply these techniques from the control role in the hope of producing "perfect performances" and a flawless presentation of yourself, you will be disappointed. In dealing with the intensely interpersonal world of teams, no technique is foolproof, and no technique can control the contingencies of an all-too-human world. Abraham Zaleznik, the management theorist, tells the story of a CEO who found that her subordinates were meticulous in preparing budgets and compliant in following the rules, but were unconnected emotionally to the whole process. The driving rhythms of the budget cycle and the abstract language of numbers and tables made it difficult for the team to talk about the core issues of technology and markets that preoccupied managers day to day. Understanding this situation, the CEO noted, "I need the numbers, but more importantly, I need executives with a fire in their bellies to accomplish something in their business that will make them and their people proud."[3]

In other words, techniques severed from their human context are lifeless and ineffective. The more you hope to control others and yourself through techniques, and the more you act upon such hopes, the less collaborative and more manipulative you will seem to those around you. Like the craftsman's tools, techniques amplify your effort, your judgments, your instincts, and your empathetic responses—but they can't substitute for them.

The book is divided into five chapters and a summary. The first chapter introduces you to the nature of the new team. With this understanding in hand, Chapter 2 invites you to learn how to give your team the *structure*—the boundaries—it needs to do its work, and Chapter 3 shows you how to facilitate the team's basic *processes*. By mastering the techniques and tools you need to provide your team with both a viable structure and process, you will be able to create an empowered team that supports your work.

The fourth chapter then refocuses your attention on the needs of each individual team member. Emphasizing that each team member has a relationship to you as well as to the team, the chapter shows

3. Abraham Zaleznik, *The Management Mystique* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 95.
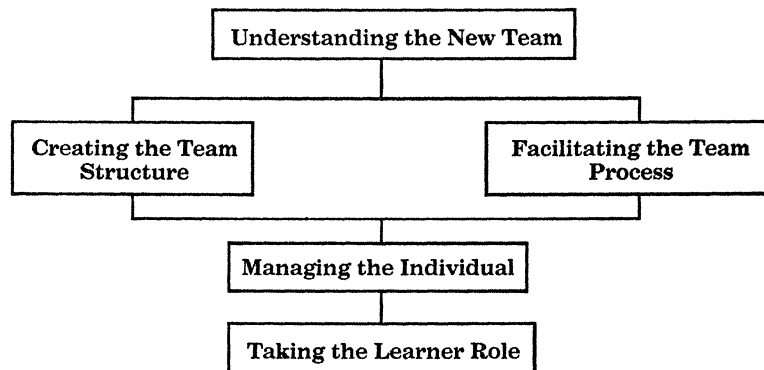
how you can supervise and support individual team members and how you can acknowledge the differences among them while also supporting and strengthening their interrelationships.

The fifth chapter brings the argument of the book together by showing how its themes and arguments are linked to the concept of the "learner role." Acknowledging that managing in a team environment puts you in the middle of a series of paradoxes, the chapter shows how you can master these paradoxes by taking up the learner rather than the control role. By learning to explore your setting and collaborating with just those people who at first appear to be the "cause" of your problems, you acknowledge your role in these problems and get others to help you solve them.

Finally, the last chapter summarizes the argument of the book and describes the characteristics of the team you will help create and sustain if you follow the book's guidelines.

The following diagram highlights the book's logical flow of argument.

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          │   Understanding the New Team     │
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┌──────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────┐
│  Creating the Team    │         │ Facilitating the Team │
│      Structure        │         │       Process         │
└──────────────────────┘         └──────────────────────┘

          ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
          │   Managing the Individual        │
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          │    Taking the Learner Role       │
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A political philosopher once said, "The perfect is the enemy of the good." This sounds paradoxical. Aren't we always searching for the better, more perfect accomplishment? Of course we are. But in doing so we are bound to stumble, to uncover our own limitations and flaws. If we regard these flaws as shameful, we will deny ourselves the experiences and experiments we need to obtain a more perfect accomplishment. Applying the lessons of this book to your own experience, you, like all learners, will make mistakes. But in working through these mistakes you will not only become a more sophisticated manager in the team environment, you will invite your

team members to take risks without fear of shaming themselves as well. This style of leadership is one hallmark of a culture that supports innovation.