

Ideas for Organizations

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This is the first in a series of newsletters taken from **Clearing Out the Dust and Cobwebs: Observations on Management, Organizations, and People**. The series contains a number of anecdotes and observations based on the experience of management consultant Bill G. Evans, as recorded by Michael H. Walker.

The anecdotes in this series are grounded in actual experience, and the principles they embody can be applied to management in any sector, public, private, or nonprofit. Each story communicates a simple truth about management. Taken as a whole, they convey an overall management philosophy.

Simple Truths About Complex Issues

No one ever said managing is easy. It's not. That's not to say managing is all that complicated, though. Books such as the bestselling *One Minute Manager* attest to this fact. The most effective managers recognize that management need not be overly involved. They understand their role, focus on what's important, and don't complicate their work with details that are better left delegated to others. It is our experience that you will be an effective manager – no matter what business you are in – if you do the following things:

- Think at the right level
- Remember Omar Bradley's rudiments of effective management
- Use the 50-50 rule
- Do curbstome analysis
- Focus on what's important – don't keep track of miles driven
- Remember the Drunkard's Prayer

Think at the Right Level

There are four levels of thinking about management and operations in any organization. The first – “vision” – has to do with overall mission and direction for the future. The second level – “strategy” – deals with the general approaches an organization takes to achieve its goals and

fulfill its mission. The third and fourth levels of thinking – “operations” and “tactics” – relate respectively to the organization and management of the enterprise and to its operational practices and procedures.

More often than not in the organizations we study, managers and policymakers skip over the first two levels entirely. Instead, they focus exclusively on operations and tactics. City councils and school boards, for example, get themselves involved in operations rather than focusing on setting policy. They act as if they were elected to manage operations when what they should be doing is setting a direction for the organization and shaping policy.

All employees in an organization – leaders, managers, and employees – must think at the right level. Developing and communicating a vision – the organization's “big picture” – and coming up with a long-term plan to turn the vision into reality should be the exclusive domain of policymakers and senior management. The men and women at this level are responsible for reviewing and evaluating operations and tactics, but not for prescribing what they will be. At the next level in the organizational structure (mid-level managers such as

Ideas

department heads) the focus should be on understanding the vision, applying the strategy, setting up operations, and prescribing the specific tactics to be used. Other employees must do some, but not all, of these things. Obviously, they must understand the vision and follow the strategy, but their job is to focus on executing the operations and tactics. The chart below is a good summary illustration of these levels and who is responsible for each.

Remember the Rudiments of Effective Time Management

Omar N. Bradley, the commander of the 15th Army Group in Europe during World War 11, was an extraordinary leader and manager. One of his greatest strengths was a willingness to tolerate leadership styles that were quite different from his own. George Patton's fiery brand of leadership was diametrically opposed to Bradley's more measured approach. Wearing pearl-handle revolvers and cracking a whip were not Bradley's style. Nonetheless, Bradley gave Patton his head and rarely tried to rein him in. Patton got results. Bradley recognized that his role as leader and manager was to make sure that results were achieved, not to impose his own personal brand of leadership on anyone under his command.

In the memoir of his wartime experiences, *A Soldier's Story*, Bradley relates that he learned how to be a manager while serving as weapons department chief at the Infantry School in Fort Benning, Georgia. The assistant commandant to whom Bradley reported was a colonel named George Catlett Marshal. Bradley writes, "From General Marshal I learned the rudiments of effective command. Throughout the war I deliberately avoided intervening in a subordinate's duties. When an officer performed as I expected him to, I gave him a free hand. When he hesitated, I tried to help him. And when he failed, I relieved him."

Use the 50-50 Rule

"Fifty percent of a manager's job is getting the work done. The other half is taking care of his or her people." This is an aphorism all managers should have inscribed, framed, and hung on their office wall. Most managers are aware that their job consists of these two major tasks. The mistake they often make is getting the parts out of balance.

Some managers spend too much time taking care of their people, making sure they have a good working environment, reasonable work schedules, and a workload that requires relatively little

Levels of Thinking in an Organization				
Participant	Vision	Strategy	Operations	Tactics
Governing Board, Council or Commissions	Has	Approves	Evaluates	Reviews
Senior Manager (CEO, Superintendent of Schools, Mayor)	Has	Formulates	Evaluates or Manages	Reviews
Department Heads	Understands	Follows	Establishes	Prescribes
Other Employees	Understands	Follows	Executes	Participates

“heavy lifting.” The risk in taking this approach is that the work will not be done at a reasonable cost. Managers who focus too much on taking care of their people sometime forget that their primary job is to serve customers, not employees.

At the other extreme are the managers who focus exclusively on getting the job done. Such managers think nothing of making unreasonable requests of their subordinates. The work gets done, but again, the cost is high. As every manager knows, low morale affects productivity and quality. It also increases turnover and losing valued employees is expensive!

Examples from two police departments we studied illustrate what can happen if you get the parts out of balance. In one of these police departments, located in a midsize western city, the chief was placing too much emphasis on “taking care of his people.” The chief told us that one of the legacies he wanted to leave his patrol officers was a ten-hour per day, four-day per week schedule. (A more typical police schedule is five eight-hour days a week.)

Unless such schedules are very carefully managed, assigning employees who must be on duty 24 hours a day to a ten-hour day is extremely expensive. We calculated the cost of establishing the ten-hour day and came up with a figure of over \$1 million a year. The police chief had failed to calculate these costs, however, because he was focusing to an inordinate degree on taking care of his troops.

Conversely, when we asked the police chief of a small eastern city what he focused on when dealing with subordinates, he replied, “Trying to catch those sonsofbitches doing something wrong.” Due primarily to the chief’s “negative leadership,” the officers in this police department did only the minimum of what was expected of them. Everything was done by the book. The work got done, but the officers would not put out the extra effort to provide truly high-quality service. A manager’s job really adds up to more than the sum of 50 plus 50. It’s more like 101

percent -- the added percentage point is the amount of energy, time, and commitment involved in keeping the two halves balanced.

Do Curbstone Analysis

Our work calls for a great deal of plane travel. Our consultants spend a lot of time in airports, standing at the curb waiting for the bus from the rental car agency. If we are waiting for an Avis bus, invariably a National bus will go by, followed by a Thrifty bus, and followed by a Hertz bus. As you stand at the curbside at one o’clock in the morning watching the buses go by, you notice that most of the buses are empty or nearly empty. You then begin to wonder why the rental companies don’t pool their resources and operate buses jointly. If they did, each company would not only save money but also improve service.

There may be some good explanation why the rental car companies rarely work together to transport their customers. We are convinced, however, that it makes sense to ask such questions.

All managers should view their operations from the curbstone time to time and ask, “Does this make sense? Is there a better way to do this?” Surprisingly often the answer to the first question is no, and the answer to the second is yes.

Don’t Keep Track of Miles Driven

As part of the consulting process, our consultants usually conduct confidential, one-on-one interviews with employees at all levels of the organizations we study. The purpose of these interviews is to develop a detailed understanding of the organization and its operations and to solicit ideas from the employees who work in the organization. We like to interview people where they work, because that gives us a real sense of

what they do on the job. When we study police departments, for example, we spend a lot of time riding around with patrol officers in their cars because that's where they do most of their work.

Once, when we were studying the police department of a small Midwestern city, we noticed a very peculiar patrol pattern. Instead of patrolling in assigned beat zones, the officers tended to patrol exclusively on a road that ringed the city. They rarely stopped their vehicles except when responding to a call to which they had been dispatched. Instead, they spent most of their time driving around the city at 30 miles an hour.

It took us quite a while to find out the cause of this unusual behavior. Near the end of the study we discovered that one of the ways patrol officers were evaluated by their supervisors was by a count of the number of miles driven per shift. Because this number was one of the few quantitative measures of patrol activity that was monitored, patrol officers focused on maximizing their performance on this measure. They knew that by driving on the road ringing the city at 30 miles per hour they could maximize the number of miles driven on a shift.

Of course the number of miles driven has nothing to do with the efficiency or effectiveness of patrol officers. It did not occur to the patrol officers, or to their supervisors, that focusing on miles driven made them less rather than more productive.

As a general rule, people will maximize the activity in which their performance is measured. Consequently, managers must be very careful when deciding what information to track.

Remember the Drunkard's Prayer

Most people are familiar with the famous prayer by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,

which has been appropriated by Alcoholics Anonymous and is also known as the "Drunkard's Prayer." It reads "God grant me the courage to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, and the wisdom to know one from the other."

Some managers have not been granted the wisdom to know the difference between the things they can and cannot change. An example from the army illustrates this. While one of our senior consultants was serving in Korea, the army spent a lot of effort trying to control the spread of venereal disease among the troops. One commanding officer made a great to-do about the issue. He even went so far as to include maps with the soldiers' passes, outlining all the "red light" districts, so the soldiers would know what areas were off limits. Any soldier found in these areas would be punished severely. Needless to say, any soldier who was so inclined made a beeline to the areas noted on the maps. Despite the officer's efforts, the incidence of venereal disease among the soldiers did not change. The commander would have been better off, as the prayer says, being serene.

Effective managers, like effective army officers, need the wisdom to know the difference between what they can and cannot change. We have found that even managers who possess this wisdom often lack the serenity to accept the things they cannot change. We have found that even managers who possess this wisdom often lack the serenity to accept the things they cannot change. We have met any number of managers who insist on beating their heads against a wall trying to change things that can't be changed. Usually, the only change that results is in their blood pressure. So the next time you feel the urge to try to change something you know you can't, remember the drunkard's prayer. Relax!