

## **"What great managers do"**

*By Marcus Buckingham, Harvard Business review, March 2005*

One quality truly sets great managers apart from the rest. They discover what is unique about each person and then capitalize on it.

Great managers focus on the uniqueness of people not just because it makes good business sense. They do so because of their fascination with individuality for its own sake. Fine personality differences, though they may be invisible to some, are crystal clear to great managers. Figuring out what makes people tick comes naturally to them.

**Make the most of strengths.** It takes time and effort to gain a full appreciation of an employee's strengths and weaknesses. We must spend a good deal of time outside the office walking around, watching each person's reactions to events, listening, and taking mental notes about what each individual is drawn to and what each person struggles with. In addition, we can obtain a lot of information about a person by asking a few simple, open-ended questions and listening carefully to the answers. Two queries in particular can be very useful.

To identify a person's strengths, we can ask, "What was the best day at work you've had in the past three months?" Through this question, we can find out what the person was doing and why he enjoyed it so much. A strength should not be equated with something we are good at. In fact, it might be something we aren't good at yet. It might be something we find so intrinsically satisfying that we look forward to doing it again and again and getting better at it over time.

To identify a person's weaknesses, we can ask, "What was the worst day you've had at work in the past three months?" And then probe for details about what she was doing and why it was so painful. As with a strength, a weakness is not merely something we are bad at (in fact, we might be quite competent at it). It is something that drains us of energy, an activity that we never look forward to doing and that when we are doing it, all we can think about is stopping.

Although we must look out for both the strengths and weaknesses of our employees, our focus should be on the strengths.

**Trigger good performance.** A person's strengths aren't always on display. Sometimes they require precise triggering to turn them on. But knowing what

trigger to press calls for a good understanding of the team member involved. One employee's trigger might be tied to the time of day. Another employee's trigger might be tied to time the boss spends with her. Another worker's trigger might be the need for independence.

**Tailor to learning styles.** Although there are many learning styles, a careful review of adult learning theory reveals that three styles predominate. These three are not mutually exclusive. But staying attuned to each employee's style will help us get more out of them.

**Analysers** understand a task by taking it apart, examining its elements, and reconstructing it piece by piece. They need to absorb all there is to know about a subject before they can begin to feel comfortable with it. Without enough information, they will dig and push until they get it. The best way to teach analysers is to give them ample time in the classroom, role-play with them, and do post-mortem exercises with them. We must always allow them time to prepare. The analysers hate to make mistakes. They prepare diligently in order to minimize the possibility of mistakes. These people cannot be taught just by throwing them into a new situation.

**Doers**, as the name suggests, learn by doing. Their most powerful moments occur during the performance. Doers learn the most while they figure out things out for themselves. They do not like too much preparation. It is best to give them a specific task, provide a brief overview of the outcomes expected and get out of the way. Then gradually we can increase the degree of complexity of the task until they have mastered every aspect of their role. Doers are not worried about making mistakes, which they see as the raw material for learning.

**Watchers** won't learn much through role-playing or by doing. Since most formal training programs incorporate both of these elements, watchers often come across as rather poor students. But they aren't necessarily poor learners. Watchers can learn a great deal when they are given the chance to see the total performance. Studying the individual parts of a task does not inspire them. Watchers learn best when they see the complete picture. Watchers should be taken out of the classroom and given the chance to shadow the most experienced performers.

## **Conclusion**

A manager's most precious resource is time. Great managers know that the most effective way to invest their time is to identify exactly how each employee is different and then to figure out how best to utilize their talents. Great managing is about freeing people to do what they like to do and not transform them. It's about constantly tweaking the environment so that the unique contribution, the unique needs, and the unique style of each employee can be given free rein. The success of a manager will depend almost entirely on the ability to do this.