



The New Manager: Transition to tyrant?

Glenn P. Martin

The rhetoric of management nowadays is about teamwork rather than being “the boss”. We talk about flat organisations and worker participation in decision making. For all that, when employees are selected for their first supervisory posting, they are likely to assume autocratic tendencies.

They are frequently excellent in their technical expertise but have little or no management training. They feel the need to assert their authority, and the new rhetoric has little impact on their initial management style. It may be natural for new managers to resort to an autocratic style of management in order to win respect, but it is also true that Australian managers generally tend to operate in an autocratic manner. New managers may therefore tend to be autocratic because this is the management style modelled by most of the seasoned managers around them.

According to David Lamond, of the Sydney Graduate School of Management (2002), studies conducted in the 1980s of managers' personality, using the Myers Briggs instrument, showed managers to be predominantly rational, rigid, autocratic and task-focused, with a low level of “soft skills”. Few managers had a high people focus (eg a concern for staff morale).

The 1995 Karpin Report on Australian managers returned a similar conclusion. The report was critical of managers' ability to communicate, motivate, lead and negotiate with their workers. The report also concluded that managerial attitudes were resistant to alternative styles of management.

Recent studies carried out at the University of Western Sydney (Lamond, 2002) on managers' personality and management style indicate that little has changed since the studies of the 1980s. Managers still tend to have a low people focus. They tend to be rational and goal-oriented, and perceive managerial activity in terms of systems and processes rather than in terms of people and relationships.

Do management development programs work?

The need for new managers to learn and develop appropriate management skills is recognised in the priority given to management development programs in the overall corporate training agenda. Management development rated as the third highest training priority in a recent CCH Australia survey, after technical skills and knowledge [1], and computer applications [2].

The Frontline Management Program which was developed in the wake of the Karpin Report attempted to address the need for managers to develop the competencies that are required for effective management. The areas that were identified as the foundations of effective management were:

- **leading by example** – managing personal work priorities;
- **coaching, facilitating and empowering others** – establishing effective workplace relationships and facilitating teamwork;
- **creating best practice** – managing operational activities, including information, safety and continuous improvement; and
- **creating an innovative culture** – leading change and learning.

There are, of course, other formulations of what the competencies of the ideal manager are, but this framework is broad enough to include all the skills and qualities that are deemed to be important. The problem is not so much in defining the domains of management skills, but in the nature of the training itself.

Many writers have argued that the link between possession of knowledge about management and improved management performance is tenuous at best. A study by Cox and Cooper (1988) concluded strongly, "There is no evidence that academic learning changes behaviour or develops practical skills such as those required in management."

Some programs respond to this criticism by focusing on competencies, as opposed to the learning of cognitive concepts which are dissociated from the work context. The literature on learning has, through the 1990s, almost come to a consensus that effective learning is "situated learning", and that learners must construct their own cognitive framework for new knowledge and skills. This is to say that the shortcomings of the "transmission" model of learning have been recognised.

However, what is critical in the area of management development is the centrality of people skills. There are certainly technical and cognitive skills required to manage effectively, as the Frontline Management model indicates, but that model also highlights the importance of interpersonal skills — coaching, facilitating, motivating, and managing the performance of others.

The conclusion of an early 1980s book on management development is still valid:

Most managers fail because of personality factors. These factors include... inability to delegate, poor judgment and abrasive personality. Managers fail, too, from timidity and laziness, from lack of the sustained drive necessary for achievement, and because they are too weak to withstand the continual pressure of responsibility. Mainly, managers succeed or fail because of personality factors. (Nash, 1983)

Today we would regard the expression "personality factors" as ill-defined and unsatisfactory. But what we have gained since then is a knowledge of emotional intelligence (EQ). The factors Nash talks about are, in fact, all aspects of EQ. Poor judgment, lack of a sustained drive for achievement, inability to cope with responsibility, are all part of Daniel Goleman's construct of emotional intelligence.

Why is this relevant? Because one of the most important arguments that Goleman makes in his workbook on EQ is that EQ cannot be developed using "traditional" training programs. Goleman says:

One common mistake made by organisations is trying to instil an emotional competence (like a service orientation or leadership) using the same techniques that effectively teach how to create a business plan. This is not enough: changing a habit based on emotional intelligence demands an entirely new kind of learning strategy. (Goleman, 1998)

What would an effective training program look like?

The starting point for management development programs is that many new appointees to a supervisory or management role have little preparation for the role, and little idea about what it actually involves. They have probably been a sound performer in a hands-on operational role, and the organisation hopes that their understanding of operations will enable them to cope with the managerial side of things.

Managing people is a substantially different function to carrying out production or service operations. It involves an examination of your personal values, habits and attitudes, and those of others, and it involves having to engage others in the completion of tasks rather than doing them yourself. It involves value judgments and decision making rather than just the preparation of accurate reports.

These functions are not just more of what the operative was doing formerly, but a completely different set of functions. One study of new managers (Hill, 1992) found that for most of them, their expectations about the role were largely at odds with the reality.

The most general outcome of training programs for managers is that participants return to the workplace with a “buzz” that lasts for a few days. The buzz wears off, and behaviours, if they changed at all, revert back to their former state. The challenge for training and HR managers is to develop programs that achieve significant and lasting changes.

The emotional competence framework that Goleman assembled consists of five areas:

- self-awareness,
- self-regulation,
- motivation,
- empathy and
- social skills.

The question is then, what does it take to achieve change in the awareness and behaviour of new managers in these areas? Some of the requirements are obvious and trite, but even then, organisations often ignore them because they are committed to a given program structure. Goleman recommends that trainers:

- assess the context and the individuals, and design training to target the identified needs;
- gauge the readiness of individuals for the learning, and deliver feedback with care;
- motivate, and make change self-directed;
- encourage practice of new behaviours, and provide support through networks of others addressing similar goals;
- provide models of behaviour;
- reinforce change through recognition, feedback on performance, and rewards.

These recommendations indicate that a different kind of learning is involved here. Goleman says, “Emotional competence cannot be improved overnight, because the emotional brain changes its habits over weeks and months, not hours and days.” Following on from this point, he says, “People learn a new skill more effectively if they have repeated chances to practise it over an extended period of time.”

What these insights about changing management behaviour show is that it is not just the training course itself that is important. Management style is conditioned by the organisation’s prevailing organisational culture. For training to be effective, the culture must support the changes desired. That is to say, top managers must work on reinforcing positive management behaviour through their policies, their communications, their personal example and their active coaching and mentoring of other managers.

Training has been found to be much more effective when it is followed up in the workplace with one-to-one coaching. In one British study (Laabs, 2000), training led to increases in productivity of 22%, but when training was followed up with coaching, the increases in productivity went by 88%.

Choices

Managers generally adopt a particular style, which is a product of their own personality, their knowledge about the management role, and their organisational environment. Unless emotional intelligence is fostered in the organisation, and unless management development programs are constructed in the light of EQ, managers are likely to default to a style that is autocratic, simply to shore up their fears of not coping as a manager.

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Published in *Training & Development in Australia* (Australian Institute of Training & Development), August 2002

TouchWood Ethics is based in Sydney, Australia.

Contact TouchWood Ethics via Glenn Martin as below.

Telephone: +61 2 9945 3345

Email: info@twethics.com

Website: www.twethics.com