

Do You Want To Be A (Better) Manager?



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Award-Winning Author

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Technology Can Make You a Bad Manager

On a recent flight out of Chicago, I found myself seated next to Jack, an IT manager in a medium-sized company. Jack was on his way to interview for a position as IT Manager in a larger corporation. He explained that he had reached the limits of his present job, and his only chance to advance himself was in a company with a larger IT organization.

“Why don’t you stay with your present organization and move into general management?” I asked.

“That was my goal when I took this job three years ago,” Jack said, “but there’s not a chance. The president of the company sees me as a technical specialist, lacking the skill to become a “real” executive. So I’m looking for someplace else, where, I’ll be appreciated.

“But three years isn’t a very long time with one company,” I said. “Perhaps they don’t feel you’ve had enough, time to prove yourself to them.”

I’ve done a lot for them in three years, but they don’t appreciate how much work it is managing in this crisis environment.”

“What do you mean?”

“Technology is changing every month, and I can’t find good people. It’s impossible to keep a technical staff together long enough to make improvements in the present systems, let alone keep up with the new technology. Junior programmers demand inflated salaries, and if they don’t get them, they jump ship to some other company that’s desperate enough to pay them. And senior programmers”

“What about senior programmers?”

“Why talk about it?” Jack said bitterly. “There’s no sense even thinking about hiring a senior person, let alone starting to search for one. You give the moon, and a year later they want the sun. They seem to think they could get rid of us managers and run the place without us.”

I could see why Jack was so bitter. In effect, he was being squeezed from top to bottom. His management didn’t want to let him advance, and he felt the pressure of his own employees trying to advance up from below. Still, I had a hard time feeling sorry for Jack. I’m always suspicious of managers who speak badly of their employees.

The army has a saying: “There are no bad soldiers, only bad officers.” Of course Jack has problems with his employees. But the manager’s job is to deal with such problems, so if Jack complains about bad people he’s telling me he’s not doing his job. Jack says his people were leaving for better salaries, but salaries are about tenth on list of reasons technical people switch jobs. The main reason people leave jobs is poor management.

Jack himself was leaving his job because his own management didn’t understand him. They wouldn’t give him the opportunity he thought he deserved, nor would they guide him to the self-improvement he needed to advance. He complained that his bosses never supported his requests for management training, but when I asked him about training his own people, he said, “Why invest in training them? They’re going to leave before I get a return on my investment. My staff is turning over at a rate of 25% per year. Technical people have no company loyalty whatsoever.”

By changing jobs every three years, Jack himself was “turning

over” at a rate of 33% per year. His management, knowing that “technical people have no company loyalty, refused to take Jack’s own aspirations seriously. Jack, like so many IT managers, was locked in a “disloyalty cycle.” His management didn’t take him seriously as a person, so he wasn’t loyal to them. Because he wasn’t loyal to them they refused to take him seriously as a person. In his own career, Jack was modeling the problem he was having with his staff.

Not every IT manager has Jack’s problems. Others have broken the “disloyalty cycle,” or stayed out of it in the first place. They are not panicked by the pace of technology, but insist on developing their own employees. They may hire experienced people, but they do not try to “buy” instant expertise. They know that the expertise they buy is more likely to be bought again by someone else. They have excellent technical staffs, with low turnover. Their pay scales are competitive, but not exceptional. Their employees tend to be loyal to their companies because they know their managers are loyal to their companies.

One of my clients has an IT manager who budgets a minimum of 20 days of training per employee per year, and woe to one of his managers who fails to reach that minimum for each employee. This investment isn’t wasted because most employees want to stay at a company that actively demonstrates loyalty to them. Sure, there is some turnover, but it measures around 6%, instead of than Jack’s 25%. Moreover, this company tends to turn over the people it would rather lose, rather than the ones it would rather retain.

IT managers like Jack can’t have it both ways. If they want to become “real” executives, they’ll have to start acting like real executives. That means taking responsibility rather than

blaming their employees. It means developing good people, not trying to pirate them from other companies and then griping about how other companies are pirating them from him. But Jack doesn't have time to develop his employees. If he doesn't get promoted in three years, he won't be around to reap the benefits of his investment in them. He'll be out looking for a new job that will show him more loyalty.

“Real” executives take the long view. They’re the kind of people who at age 60 can be found planting trees whose shade they won’t live long enough to enjoy. IT managers who think fast-moving technology requires short-term quick fixes are stuck in a middle-management mentality. They will never become real executives.