COMMUNICATION

Managers often proclaim, "I always have an open door," but, for many staff members, this exhortation has become pretty meaningless. A much more positive message to give your staff members is, "You must come and tell me about any problems you have, and I will not be happy if I find you have been bottling things up."

To back this up, of course, you will have to make yourself accessible. This approach can only work if you provide people with plenty of opportunities to talk to you and if you always make people's need to talk a top priority. Saying, "Come in and sit down" is more positive than reaching for your appointment book to arrange a time to talk at some point in the future.

Communicating with your staff
requires that you listen.

Communicating with your staff requires that you listen, not just talk. Listening is a skill that most people must constantly work at to do well, but there are a number of techniques that can help you become a better listener:

- *Eliminate avoidable interruptions.* Divert your telephones, beepers, pagers, and the like, so that they do not require your response. If you have an office with a

door, post a "do not disturb" sign or ask someone to intercept visitors. If you work in open plan, find some other, more private place where you can meet without distraction.

- *Tell the person if you have a time limit.* If you can meet only for a specific length of time because of some other commitment, tell the person in advance and then stop worrying about scheduling conflicts. By being open about your commitments, you can then give the person your undivided attention during the time you meet.

- *Ask open questions.* You will learn more relevant information if you ask questions that cannot be answered by a simple yes or no. For example, ask, "Why do you think you have difficulty talking to John about this?"

- *Do not finish other people's sentences or talk before they are finished speaking.* To listen well, you have to go at the other person's pace. If you need to hurry things, do it tactfully, taking care not to interrupt mid-speech.

- *Act interested, even if it is an act.* Sometimes, by feigning interest even when you don't feel genuinely interested, you will find that you become more involved in the issue under discussion. At the very least, don't look bored.

Act interested, even if it is an act.

- *Don't be judgmental or argumentative.* People will nearly always react negatively if they feel they are being judged or blamed, whether fairly or unfairly. Use factual phrasing that removes any tone of accusation, saying, for example, "I was upset" rather than "You upset me." Encourage people to learn from their own mistakes by talking openly and uncritically when problems arise. If you behave otherwise, your staff members will avoid taking risks and will not tell you when they have made mistakes.
- *Think about how the other person perceives things.* People often correctly accuse their managers of not understanding their point of view, and not appreciating the problems they face in trying to do a good job. Make every effort to avoid being that kind of manager.
- *Don't jump to conclusions.* Keep an open mind, and let your staff know that you want to hear all the facts.
- *Treat people as individuals.*

The last point is extremely important—so important in fact that I've separated out my reasons from the bulleted list to expand upon them as follows: Good people-management is predicated on getting the best out of people. This means that you have to know what motivates an individual, and also what upsets him or her. You need to understand an individual's strengths and weaknesses. The only way to do this is to talk with each person on your team so that you know what makes the individual tick. One-on-one conversations build strong relationships; strong relationships build the team. However, in your role as manager, you must be wary of crossing the line between relationship-building conversations and interference.

When does healthy interest become an invasion of privacy?

In some instances, a manager's interest in a staff member's activities can be interpreted as prying or worse. To avoid problems, I warn new front-line managers that an invasion of pri-

vacy occurs *whenever the person involved thinks it does.* When I am the manager, I bring this issue up explicitly, emphasizing that people must tell me directly—and immediately—if I have broached a subject they find uncomfortable. You, like me, most probably are not a trained mental-health professional or counselor and, while listening to someone seldom does harm and often helps, offering advice on personal issues can be dangerous and almost always should be avoided. Restrict your discussions to how you can help the individual handle the business implications of any issues that verge on the personal.

When does your healthy interest
become an invasion of privacy?

How dearly people hold their privacy is evidenced by the fact that most people will only talk to you if they trust you—as a person and as a manager—so you need to avoid doing things that will destroy that trust. Certain behaviors are sure to damage a trusting relationship, as detailed below:

Be wary of repeating confidences to your bosses. If you repeat confidences inappropriately, your behavior is likely to kill any trust your team has in you. Of course, there are times when sharing a subordinate's confidences with your management will be necessary, but repeating confidences to an untrustworthy boss is an invitation to disaster for you as a manager. When you find yourself in a situation in which passing on a confidence to your boss seems in your team's best interest, let your decision to speak or remain silent be influenced by the degree of trust you have in your boss to respond in the way that you want. Keep silent until you are sure the repeated confidence will be respected.

Do not gossip about confidences. Never tell anecdotes about things you discovered in confidence—even if you believe you have made such anecdotes anonymous. The person whose confidences are featured in an anecdotal exchange will feel humiliated and resentful—not feelings that are conducive to trust between manager and staff.

Do not tell the same thing differently to different people. If your team suspects that you take a different line with different people, their trust in you will evaporate.

Don't say things about people that you wouldn't tell them to their face. To behave one way behind a person's back and another in direct encounters with that person shows a deep lack of moral fiber on your part. Never allow yourself to sink so low.

Do tell the truth and be straightforward with people. Immediately following four negative admonitions, this last affirmative seems obvious and easy to follow. Don't be fooled: Being honest and straightforward can be difficult. In my consideration of whether management is manipulation, I discussed this issue and pointed out that you will not always be in a position where you can explain the true situation to your staff. The important thing to remember here is that a manager always should try to be as truthful and straightforward as possible.

CHAPTER 3

Managing People in Teams: Leadership Principles

What is leadership? Why is it so frightening? I have given both questions considerable thought over the years since I took my first job as a manager. I think I have answers, but before I attempt even a preliminary definition of leadership, let me list some of the reasons why I believe many new managers find the idea of leadership so scary:

- They worry that they cannot live up to the image of leadership that has been created by the popular culture.
- They fear having responsibility for the long-term survival of the team.
- They panic at having to lead people who are older and more experienced than themselves.
- They shrink at the idea of exercising authority and do not wish to be seen by the team as an authority figure.

By discussing the characteristics essential to leadership, I hope to take some of the fear out of the subject. My intent is to debunk damaging myths about what it takes to be a good leader, and to describe the qualities good leaders should possess.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Leadership, at its simplest, occurs when a person sets the direction and goals for a group of people and leads members of the group toward those goals. When the leader is a front-line manager, the group being led is that manager's team. In order to set goals and propel people toward them, a leader needs to create a *vision* of the future, and to have the *respect* and *trust* of the team so that its members will willingly follow him or her to achieve that vision.

Vision is a creative thing, but the essential bedrock on which your vision must be built is an understanding of the basics of your business. As leader, you must have answers to such questions as: Who are the team's customers? What does your team do that is valued by those customers? How do your customers and your organization measure the performance of your team?

Respect comes to a person who gets things done. Actions speak louder than words, and achievement speaks louder than actions. People respect competence and professionalism in a leader.

Trust comes to a person who is honest and open, whose actions match his or her words, and whose willingness to face difficult issues never flags.

A leader must be endowed with vision, respect, and trust—all lofty attributes—but a leader must also be ready to perform the many different roles associated with front-line management. For example, the leader is the person who makes the tough decisions. The leader creates a community, or culture, within the team. The leader creates the organization within that community and decides who has authority within the team. The leader assures the welfare of the staff. The leader provides the interface between the team and the rest of the organization. The leader is the figurehead of the team.

Although I address various aspects of these many different leadership roles throughout this book, this chapter concentrates on the qualities that underpin good leadership. It also

points out a range of common misconceptions about leadership.

LEADERSHIP MYTHS EXPOSED

The first common misconception about leadership is that leaders must "look the part." The notion that leaders should be in the mold of the comic book hero with the square jaw, steady gaze, and firm handshake, is complete nonsense. The Golden Rule of Management tells us that leadership is about what you do and is not about appearances.

The notion that leaders should be in the mold of the comic book hero is complete nonsense.

It is often assumed that leaders must have charisma. Leaders with charismatic personalities certainly have many advantages over people with less flamboyant characters, but if you are such a person, you should be aware of a range of faults that charismatic leaders are prone to have:

LOOKING AT STEREOTYPES

In the sections that follow, you may feel that I am guilty of perpetuating offensive stereotypes about different professions. Please keep in mind as you read that, in my own career, I have at various times been a creative type, an IT person, a salesman, and also a consultant; so if I insult such people, I also insult myself. I will try to avoid being offensive, but it is my view that many professionals do indeed exhibit stereotypical characteristics. I am not saying that every member of every profession displays the qualities I describe, but different professions do tend to act, and react, in particular ways. Managers can benefit from being aware of how and why different professions act the way they do.

Lawyers

I have a confession to make: The subject of law fascinates me, and I have enjoyed my interactions with legal experts and contracts staff throughout the years I have been in management. So, let me start this section on stereotypes by giving the lawyers' side of the story.

From the lawyer's viewpoint

First, to hear a lawyer tell it, people always wait until it's too late to consult their attorney: If only people asked for advice in good time, then life would be so much easier. Second, no one remembers the pressure the lawyer was put under to get a contract out quickly, when years later the agreement is tested in court and found to be poorly drafted. Third, people do not understand the importance of legal issues and treat the lawyer as an irritating nuisance who keeps them from getting on with their business, rather than as an expert who is trying to stop the careless manager from unnecessarily risking the business. Fourth, . . .

Because I am an essentially humane sort, I will spare you Clauses 4 through 332 of the "Lament of the Lawyer," but trust that you can find at least some truth in the three laments I have listed. The fact is, a frosty relationship often exists between the

manager or businessman and the lawyer. The reason for this is that the fundamental personality traits of managers and lawyers tend to be diametrically opposed.

Managers tend to be risk-takers, while lawyers are trained to be risk-averse. I believe that managers and lawyers should openly acknowledge this fundamental divide and try to appreciate the views of the other side. The middle ground is *risk-management*—your lawyer must ensure that you understand the full implications of all the risks you choose to accept.

An additional personality issue of which managers need to be aware is that *legal training reinforces adversarial personalities.* Lawyers are trained to win arguments, and most good lawyers enjoy a good fight. The fact that a good fight is usually highly profitable for lawyers enters into the equation as well.

From the manager's viewpoint

Looking at lawyers and the law from the specific perspective of the front-line manager helps us to identify some behavior and practices that the manager can use to his or her advantage:

Lawyers cannot give short answers to questions. I have noticed that when lawyers answer a question, they frequently give a very full context to their answer, sometimes going all the way back to first principles. It is my experience that it is hopeless to resist, and it is much better to listen patiently—you may even learn something new.

Lawyers cannot give short answers to questions.

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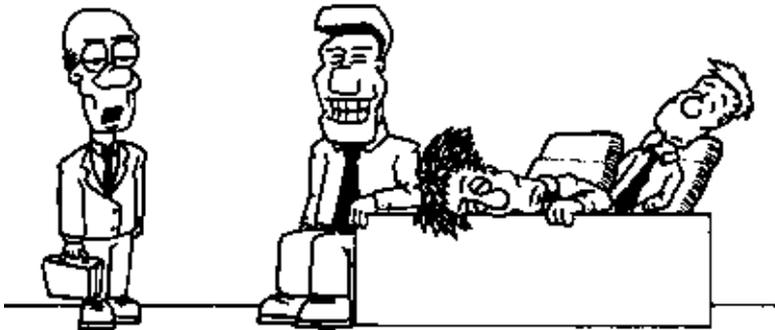
Lawyers should not be the key decision-makers in the early stages of business negotiations. The purpose of a legal agreement is to accurately record a deal that has been negotiated by business people. Lawyers generally do not have the right motivations, or the right temperaments, for business negotiations.

Lawyers should be encouraged to create contracts like prenuptials. One of the main services that lawyers provide is to help parties to a contract agree to the terms while the parties are still friends, much like an engaged couple agrees to a prenuptial agreement that will determine property and custodial rights in the event of a divorce. If you can get contracts drafted to resemble prenuptials, you will have done yourself a big service.

Lawyers should not be permitted to delay urgent action. Of all the times I have found lawyers to be unhelpful, the most extreme is when there is a crisis. Lawyers, by their nature and training, like to fully research a topic before offering advice; as a result, they react badly to having to give the immediate advice needed in a crisis. A second major problem with how lawyers respond in times of crisis is that the difficulty can often be best resolved from a public-relations perspective, by an honest admission of responsibility. Lawyers hate to have their clients admit liability and, consequently, a strong business lead may be necessary to put the lawyers "back in the box." Once the lawyers realize that you really do intend to apologize, they will be of great use in drafting a positive PR response while still insuring that liability is minimized.

IT Staff

Unlike with lawyers, problems in dealing with IT staff have more to do with the nature of the IT profession than with the particular personality traits of staff members. Although IT professionals use the phrase *software engineering,* the front-line manager needs to understand that software engineering is not an engineering discipline in the same way that civil engineering is. To state that software is based on discrete mathematics