

Earning the badge

By Nick Wake, Head of Marketing Communications, Grass Roots

Do you remember the Blue Peter badge? Wouldn't it be great if there was a Good Manager badge? I'd certainly be thrilled to receive one. I'm not saying I necessarily deserve it (something to be given not claimed), but I know for sure that I'd have a much better chance of winning one now, than when I first started out in my management career...

In fact, I don't mind admitting that I cringe a bit when I look back and think what I was probably like when I was given my first taste of people responsibility. I don't recall receiving any specific training for it and I suspect it came as a by-product of successfully convincing someone that I should be paid more money. I'm sure I'm not alone in this respect.

What I realise now, twenty years on, is that the most valuable function of being a manager is to enable talent in the team to flourish. It's about getting the right people in the right places and giving them the chance to do what they do best. Funnily enough people tend to respond very well when they are allowed or enabled to do this. A member of my team is a great technician, with a desire to do things properly, who enjoys helping and supporting others. By his own admission he is not the best communicator and is more back room than front of house. He used to be in presales, working largely on his own, cold calling on the telephone. Work was a drag. He is now our Customer Relationship System manager – a role which plays to all his strengths. As well as contributing far more value to the business, he's a different person.

A good manager does not need to be the best 'doer'. They just need to get the right doers in the right place, help them develop and get them working as an effective team. A powerful team can be unstoppable – certainly far more effective than a disparate collection of individuals. And it's a lot more fun being part of a winning team than a losing one.

I've learned a few simple 'do not's' on my management journey. Do not confuse managing people with seniority or levels of reward. A football manager is quite likely to earn less than the star players in the team – that's perfectly okay. Do not make your star player the captain unless they have the appropriate skills that come with that role. One of the most important and effective managerial decisions I have made at Grass Roots was to free the Creative Director from the burden of managing people. He didn't enjoy it and was not

particularly good at it. Instead he now focuses on what he is both brilliant and productive at – designing on behalf of our clients.

Recognise that for the people in your team, the most important business relationship they have is with you. If the relationship is a poor one, neither they nor you will be leaping out of bed each morning and rushing to get to work early. One of the most important skills in any manager is the ability to understand what motivates each individual and then to use that knowledge intelligently. It's not rocket science. If someone in the team is passionate about their football team, play to that (no pun intended). For others it will be their children – show an interest, but be sincere about it.

Professional aspirations vary. The ambitious members of your team will want opportunity. Others value security. This is important context for individual development plans.

Help people understand their part in the big picture. Set them clear objectives. Be prepared to challenge where necessary. A country club is not an environment for high performance. And in a country club you won't deal with poor performers or mickey takers, which you absolutely must do. Your team expect you to. It took me five years to deal with an 'issue' and that was too long. When the issue was eventually resolved, the change in the team dynamic was immediate, palpable and hugely positive. The only question left hanging was why matters hadn't been resolved earlier.

Being a good manager requires the ability to adopt different styles for different people in different situations. Highly competent motivated individuals need support. Unmotivated beginners need direction. Good managers see this and respond accordingly.

Make time for your team. Face to face is the best possible form of communication and the 1:1 is the best environment for it. The amount of time your team needs from you and vice versa will depend on the above, so be flexible.

My tips

- Ask for feedback. Admit to your mistakes. Learn from them. Say sorry. No one is perfect.
- It's okay to be friends with your team, but that can't influence your professional judgement. Treat everyone equally and against the same set of principles.
- Thieve the best you see in other managers. It's perfectly legal.
- Admit to your managerial weaknesses. If your team know you know them, they will be more forgiving, especially if you work to address them.
- Be honest, and don't make promises you can't keep.

...manage all of the above and you may earn the badge!

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