

Make Management (and Life!) Easier

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Jarret Jackson Contributor

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Leadership Strategy

I write about strategy, adaptive leadership and managerial psychology.



Empathy, authenticity, empowerment and adaptability can lessen your load and improve your team's ... [+] performance
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In our twenties and thirties, two things happen to many of us as part of adulting: we become parents and we become bosses, or some kind of team leaders or managers. In some ways these are very different – no team member has ever spat up on me. In others they are very similar – there is always someone wanting your attention; if things are going wrong, fingers are pointed and tears may be shed. Ultimately, you become responsible in a way that you have never been challenged before.

We manage based on our examples

In both management and parenting, the most common approach taken is to mimic what you've seen and experienced. As a parent, you are likely to raise your child as you were raised. Unless you decide and make the effort to take a different approach – perhaps one that is introduced to you by the partner you choose to raise that child with.

As a manager, the same rules apply. We most often manage the way we were managed – unless, of course, we try very hard to manage differently. But, unlike parenting, there is a disincentive to do so. Going against the grain and managing differently in any

business can draw unwanted scrutiny — and can in some cases make you the target of criticism. (Social scientists would say managers who try to be take these alternative approaches are violating social norms or refusing to conform.) As such, it's usually the outcasts, the leaders and the changemakers, not the ones who fit the mold, who are willing to try something new. In the moment, these folks are often criticized. Yet when they are successful, they become the people we so revere, like Edison, Ford and Jobs.

Empathetic management creates outperforming teams

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What you may find surprising is that the managers who are willing to take that risk — to manage based on the needs of their team instead of the needs of themselves — are more effective. Their teams outperform, their turnover is low, and they regularly are asked to take on more responsibility, raising their status in the organization. (Articles abound touting the benefits of people-first strategies, including one last May here in [Forbes](#).) This happens for two key reasons.

First, employees are happier when they like their managers and their teammates. Professor and neuroeconomist Paul Zak argues that liking breeds trust, which increases oxytocin, the neurochemical responsible for bonding. Employees who like, trust and bond with their teams are much less likely to leave, reducing employee turnover and the costs of replacement, including lost productivity. And, as I'll explain, they are also more likely to work harder to maintain their own likeability and status in the team.

Second, when employees feel like they are part of a team, they are more likely to adhere to the norms of that team. That's the mechanism behind conformity, at least according to Harvard Professor Cass Sunstein, co-author of "Nudge," and, more recently, "Conformity." The social norms for a team are the "rules" that the manager and the team agree on and may include areas such as timeliness, accountability and the definitions of a working versus finished product. The degree to which the team conforms is a good indicator of how well accepted they feel on your team.

Authoritarian approaches create fear, decreasing performance

While managers generally consider part of their job to be enforcing adherence to norms, they may use their authority alone to make demands. Colloquially, we call this the command-and control model. Authority is one of the principles of influence identified by social psychologist and professor Robert Cialdini (as are the aforementioned concepts, liking and social norms). But managing through one's

authority isn't really authority. It's using fear to get a result. Real authority, the kind that influences, comes from respect. With real authority, team members turn to you for guidance and help; that's much more positive, creates a supportive team environment, and results in better outcomes for the team and the firm.

When I first started managing teams, command-and-control was the only approach I had seen modeled. Yet it was also an approach I hated. It treated me like I was a cog in the machine. It lacked humanity. Over the years and through a lot of trial-and-error, I developed a new approach whereby I treated the people who reported to me as people, not as reports. I asked them what they wanted to work on, rather than doling out assignments, for example. I gave my team members my respect, and earned theirs in return. Now, instead of using my authority to demand, I use it to coach and help. My teams became happier, started performing better, and I have consistently been recognized as the manager people beg to work.

Four principles of Empathetic Management

At its core, empathetic management is simple. It relies on four principles: empathy, authenticity, empowerment and adaptability.

1. **Empathy**, as many know, is about putting yourself in someone else's shoes. We all want to be seen, heard and validated. Empathy, when done right, with active listening, mirroring and guidance, is, one of the best ways to uncover what a team member may be struggling with. It builds trust, and makes them want to keep working with you. You become their coach, on their team, helping them improve as opposed to the manager they fear and gossip about. (As a side note to parents, it works with kids too – try getting down on their level, asking your child what is wrong, mirroring back to them what they said and how they feel, and see how quickly they stop crying).

2. **Authenticity** is a principle that sparks much debate. Many leadership gurus argue that positivity and optimism are the cornerstones of good leadership. But positivity and optimism didn't work for Captain Edward J. Smith of the Titanic, even as the musicians kept playing. Being authentic, telling it like it is, not sugarcoating situations, and enabling transparency are much more effective means of building trust and empowering workers to help their managers find solutions from the bottom-up. If you are unauthentically optimistic, you risk leaving your teams feeling "messed to," not validated or respected.

3. **Empowerment** is perhaps the hardest principle for managers because it means handing over the reins. But studies going back to the 1940s (such as Coch & French's work at Harwood, published in 1948!) consistently show the gains in performance from participative management. For over 70 years, we have proven it time and time again — in the last few decades with Six Sigma, then with Lean, and more recently with Agile. When employees are empowered, productivity increases, turnover declines, and profitability improves.

4. By taking a more empathetic, authentic and empowering approach, you are really starting to change the way your teams work and think, achieving what most organizations are striving for today: **adaptability**. Adaptability has been talked about in numerous ways. In the early 1990s, Chris Argyris, in his famous Harvard Business Review (HBR) article “Teaching Smart People How to Learn,” talked about a similar concept he called “double-loop learning.” In the 2000s, Carol Dweck’s book “Mindset” got people talking about it as a growth mindset. Adaptable teams think about the end product, not the road it takes to get there. They define the road along the way, delivering and testing pieces as they go.

Empathetic Managers build followership

Adaptable managers are empathetic listeners and challenging coaches, or servant-leaders, as some describe them; they look for what their teams need and strive to deliver it. They see what capabilities their people have and use them to design the work around those talents. As a result, adaptability maximizes performance. It may seem harder, but once you’ve tried it, you’ll see how much easier your job as a manager is and how much more effective your team becomes. As your team gets stronger, others take notice as well. You become known as a leader, as someone whose team gets work done, as the model for others to take note of.



Jarret Jackson

As CEO of Magpie Insights, I help organizations develop strategies that are rooted in the capabilities of their people, improving the likelihood of successful change and execution. The results: higher profits, improved organizational efficiency, and greater employee engagement and retention. As a coach, I help executives become more

empathetic managers and improve their adaptability and resilience as leaders. Prior to developing the Magpie approach to empathetic management, I spent nearly 20 years as a management and strategy consultant, entrepreneur, and financial services executive, while studying motivation through the lenses of psychology, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, behavioral economics, leadership and negotiations.