

MANAGEMENT NEEDS TO CATCH UP WITH WHAT PEOPLE DO: Leadership Is Work

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The traditional job of a manager has been help people below him or her in the organization to get work done. The principal functions to help subordinates were planning, organizing, and controlling. The skills that were most frequently associated with these functions were technical, interpersonal, and managerial.

As organizations added people, products, locations, and customers managers were needed. They had to provide directions and procedures for the efficiency and stability of their unit, supply information which was not readily available otherwise, and satisfy the expectations of the expanding workforce which was disposed to rely on authority. For several decades this orientation (paradigm) was valid and, in fact, contributed to the creation of “management” as a profession.

As we enter the next century the once compelling reasons for management as we originally conceived it are no longer valid. With the introduction of extensive new product and process technology and automation, greater operational efficiencies have been achieved. Improved production and supply techniques have reduced the need for predictability and repetition. The tremendous advances in information technology along with the relative low cost for its benefits, has certainly made relevant information available on a widespread basis. Also, the expectations of the workforce have come to value autonomy, empowerment, and responsibility more than close supervision. However, the foremost argument for a new “management” orientation is that the customers of almost every organization are demanding higher quality products with less waiting time and with greater service to support it.

Management functions and skills attuned to a vertical organization are insufficient in today’s competitive organization. Today the need for speed, customer responsiveness, quality and supply chain management calls for readily available information, cross-functional communication and teamwork, and greater delegation of responsibility.

The “work” managers do must reflect this new reality for organizations to succeed. The new requirements of managers includes two new skill sets which, like the original three, vary by position and level in the organization and may vary over time. One is strategy setting skill. This entails looking at the customer or market and understanding first hand the needs and expectations. This skill set applies to internal as well as external customers. Strategy setting skill requires thinking outside in.

The second is teaming or cross-functional skills. Most managers no longer “work” up and down the organization; rather they “work” across it. They work on process improvements, cross-functional teams, inter-unit data collection and coordination. Much of the vertical stuff they used to do has been handed to their people along with the equipment and tools to do it.

Consequently, these two new skill sets are rapidly becoming the dominant requirements of the “manager”!

Another implication of this change has to do with the way we look at the interactions managers have with others. It has become popular to talk in terms of “win-win” or “win-lose”. But the focus on the customer is the most significant force behind the shift to the lateral organization and the concomitant changes in the job of a manager. This new reality now compels that the customer (internal or external) be added to the equation. Interactions must consider the customer. Therefore, all interactions should account for whether the customer wins or loses. As such, “win win”, when the customer is considered, is either “win-win-win” or “win -win-lose”.