



The Helm Report: Tools, Tips, & Techniques for Avoiding Hiring Mistakes and Developing People

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This Month:

8 Steps to Becoming a Better Boss

Greetings at last! I want to apologize for the publication lapse in the last two months of our newsletter, and I appreciate the notes of concern and inquiry that I have received. The good news is that we have been so busy, including some extended time on the road, that those publication dates slipped off our radar!

I recently read about a project conducted by Google, using themselves as the “guinea pig,” that was designed to figure out, empirically rather than “by guess and by golly,” what makes a good manager. Since that’s a subject we so often discuss, I want to bring their conclusions to your attention.

In an article that appeared in the New York Times on March 12, 2011, reporter Adam Bryant reported on the results of a research project at Google: “Google’s Quest to Build a Better Boss.” Google is not only one of the most well-known companies in the United States right now, but also it is one of the most data-oriented. As the company has grown, and the number of managers has increased, they have become increasingly concerned about good

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management practices and, according to Bryant, they decided to see if they could identify good management practices that were based on empirical data rather than on the latest academic fad.

Google took a rigorous approach. They set up a team of 25 researchers and scientists who focus on HR-related research. Their charge was to identify the practices and procedures that separated “good” managers from those who were least effective managers. Their efforts were called, “Project Oxygen.”

Project Oxygen differed from similarly-intended efforts at other organizations in the scope and quantity of data that the team gathered on which to base their conclusions. There’s a good reason, by the way, that many organizations do not undertake such a comprehensive approach: it is extremely time-consuming (and time-consuming means expensive) to gather this much information, and it is often difficult to standardize and quantify the information. Google brought its considerable data-mining resources to bear on the project, however, and produced a strong database of factual information from which they drew their conclusions. The rigor with which they conducted the project strongly supports the legitimacy of those conclusions.

The Project Oxygen team gathered more than 10,000 observations of managers’ behavior on more than 100 variables from the company’s annual employee surveys, performance review scores, and other sources. Examination of these data allowed the team to assign participating managers to one of four categories, ranging from Category One: “Most Effective Managers” to Category Four: “Least Effective Managers.” The managers in Category One and the managers in Category Four went through carefully structured interviews that were designed to illuminate and expand on the study’s empirical findings. The interview procedure used the gold standard of research, the double-blind format in which neither the interviewers nor the interviewed managers were told which group the interviewees fell into. The study’s empirical findings provided the skeleton of the study and information gained from the interviews put meat on those bones.

As a result of this thorough and exacting study, eight behaviors practiced by good managers were identified. Google then used this information to develop a training program based on the eight behaviors and had *all* of their managers go through it. The results were impressive; most managers bought in to the spirit of the training, and the overall ratings by employees of manager effectiveness rose. Especially interesting was the fact that there was a 75% improvement in manager effectiveness for the managers who were in the lowest performing category by previous reviews and ratings. *Another significant aspect of Google findings is that these eight behaviors are rank ordered from **most important to least important**.*

The eight behaviors that Google identified will seem obvious in retrospect, but Google’s project demonstrates that knowing about these eight behaviors is only half the battle. The real payoff comes from training *all* managers in how to *practice* these behaviors, and encouraging them to look for opportunities to practice them every day. Here they are, in order of importance:

1. Be a good coach

- Provide specific, constructive feedback, balancing the positives and negatives
- Have regular one-on-ones, presenting solutions tailored to your employee's specific strengths

2. Empower your team and don't micromanage

- Balance latitude for your employees with availability for consultation and advice
- Make "stretch" assignments to help your team or employee tackle big problems and grow as a result

3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being

- Get to know your employees as people, with lives outside of work
- Make new members of your team feel welcome and help ease their transition to new positions

4. Don't be a sissy: be productive and results-oriented

- Help team members establish priorities for their work and use seniority to remove roadblocks
- Focus on goals and work with employees on how to achieve them

5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team

- Communication is two-way; both listen and share information
- Hold all-hands meetings and be straightforward about the messages and goals of both the team and of individual team members. Help team members connect the dots.
- Encourage open dialogue and listen to the issues and concerns of your employees.

6. Help your employees with career development

7. Have a clear vision and strategy for your team

- Even in the midst of turmoil, keep team members focused on goals and strategy
- Involve team members in setting and evolving the team's vision and in evaluating progress toward it

8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team and individual team members

- Roll up your sleeves and conduct work side by side with the team when needed
- Understand the specific challenges of the work your employees do.

None of the eight behaviors are new, and many managers use some or all of them now. Google's Project Oxygen has done three things worthy of note. First, it has lent legitimacy to these eight behaviors because they are based on actual observations and ratings of good managers rather than on the management "theory of the month." Second, by empirically establishing a rank order of the eight behaviors, they have shown that all eight are not equal in effectiveness. This finding turned Google's promotion policy on its head. Instead of relying on technical competence as the primary factor in promotion decisions as they had done in the past, Project Oxygen showed that it was dead last in terms of what is important in a good manager. Third, they have shown the powerful effect of training all managers, particularly their least effective managers, to use these behaviors.

Since we so often discuss how to find and develop good managers, I was particularly impressed by Google's findings. First, I found the relative importance of management skills to be instructive with respect to evaluating an applicant's management potential; second, I was encouraged by the project's finding about the effectiveness of good training at improving management performance. I hope that this article is useful to you as well, and I look forward to any comments you have about it.

Remember, People are *not* your most important asset,

The *RIGHT* People are!

To Hire the Best, Test!

To Reveal Management Potential, Test!

To Diagnose Problem Behavior, Test!

Until next time, all the best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kurt". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered on a light yellow rectangular background.

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