

The Mansis Update

Human Relations in Management: Necessary But Not Sufficient

(Written 25 years ago and still relevant today)

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The training industry's frenzy to promote interpersonal skill training is creating false hope for management. Many recent articles have appeared professing human relations skill training as the answer to poor management and low productivity. But the facts of life show that possessing interpersonal skills doesn't guarantee good management. Have you ever worked for a manager who had "interpersonal skills" coming out of his ears — kindly, empathetic, supportive — but still couldn't manage people?

The most important thing you do when you manage people is *what you do before* you ever meet them. Good managers know how to prevent problems. Poor managers end up creating employee performance problems and then run around trying to solve them. Many of the "interpersonal" and soft skills of management are needed, but they're needed to rectify the inefficiencies of management and fix up problems because management didn't do its job in the first place.

The principal job required of any manager or supervisor is to clarify an employee's job and role, and to specify performance standards. The real work of management is determining what you want the person to do and how well the job is to be done.

What is the difference between excellent, satisfactory and unacceptable work? This must be outlined explicitly before hiring the employee; in fact, this information provides invaluable data for use in selecting new employees. It's the failure to clarify jobs and performance standards—the cognitive as opposed to the interpersonal and social parts of managing people—that cause the vast majority of performance problems for all employees.

Managers frequently complain, "There are some things you just can't tell people, they're obvious— or should be obvious— and understood." Some managers even say they're not really sure what they want their employees to do! This is a ridiculous

state of affairs. Good managers do answer these questions. And those who don't can't manage.

Admittedly, making it crystal clear what you want employees to do is perhaps one of the more difficult things managers do— usually harder than recognizing problems and solving them. The hard skill of management is thinking ahead to prevent problems. Unfortunately, in a rush to stay current with a lot of management fads, you can forget to get the job done.

A decade ago, I was sincerely impressed by the simplicity and apparent effectiveness of the interpersonal skill movement. Influenced strongly by the human relations movement, interpersonal skills of management are essentially procedures for constructively and empathetically working with employees to solve performance problems, applying discipline or giving recognition and rewards for good work. Without specific training, most managers pick up these techniques for interacting with employees through life experiences; in particular, from watching what former bosses and managers have done. Unfortunately, many bad habits are picked up this way, and for many reasons managers can become too blunt, insensitive, unclear, confused and overly defensive when trying to interact with employees.

But with the help of some new training techniques such as structured

role playing and video-or film-based modeling, more constructive approaches to interacting with employees have been developed and taught to managers, saving management a lot of job stress and preventing the inadvertent learning of bad habits.

Since the mid-1960s, interpersonal skill training has flourished and the results from some of the research studies measuring the success of this training appear impressive. But don't be too quick to jump on the empathy bandwagon—it may take you down a wrong and expensive road. I'm not trying to belittle the importance of managers having interpersonal skills for supervising employees. Interpersonal skills are very necessary, but they're not sufficient for managing people. In fact, they become less necessary the more management does its primary job.

The apparent positive effect on productivity that interpersonal skill training has for management and supervisors may not be because management has better skills for interacting with employees. The correlation between having interpersonal skills and employee productivity may be accidental. Perhaps the true cause of improved employee performance is that, having learned interpersonal skills and developed more self confidence, a manager or a supervisor is more motivated to tell an employee what the employee's job is and what the manager's expectations are. This information depends not on the

manager's interpersonal skills but on the manager's efforts to identify and clarify job standards, job expectations and the role requirements for each employee.

The practice of management has put too much emphasis on interpersonal relationships at work and has drifted away from the fundamental responsibilities of management and leadership— making it clear which work needs to be done and how well it's to be performed.

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