The “Manager-Report” Relationship in Five Words

BY MICHAEL SHINDLER, PRESIDENT

With appreciation for critical comments and suggested edits (and long-time friendship) to Aaron Nurick, PhD, Professor of Management & Psychology at Bentley University, Waltham, MA, and author of The Good Enough Manager: The Making of a GEM.

I do not think of myself as a “businessman.” I have never made anything or sold a product. I am a lawyer (though no longer licensed), and all that I do professionally is informed by my legal background. Though I own and run my own business, I do not consider myself a CEO; that is not my highest and best use, and I have no apologies for that.

I am an implementer. Put me with a strong leader who wants to get things done and needs or is willing to allow someone else to execute the vision, and I am a valuable commodity. Allow me to interact, to play “devil’s advocate,” to shape the discussion of the vision, and I add value. Until I created my own company and my own job description in 2007, I had been wondering if a position with those characteristics even existed.

For the better part of the first half of this decade, I ran a division of a good-sized company. I managed people who knew more about their subject matters than I did, and I reported to people who knew less about my subject matter than I did. That job, along with the others I have had in the 43 years that I have been in the working world, helped mold me into whatever I am today, and all those years taught me what I share here.

What I offer is ***Five Words***.

In my view, you can measure how much you are likely to enjoy your job if these 5 simple characteristics are present in your job or in any position where you either manage someone or you report to someone. These words represent a two-way street; they cannot exist in only a one-person dynamic or a one-sided, dictatorial relationship.

First, ACCESS.

ACCESS requires communication between a manager and a report. That communication should be constant; a manager should adopt a variety of means to be available to his or her people, whether that is done by – as Tom Peters called it – “*management by walking around,*” or stop-and-go meetings in the hallway, at the coffee station or in someone’s office. That ACCESS enables a subordinate to better understand his manager, the company/department mission and the manager's approach to achieving it; ACCESS allows the manager to better understand her subordinate's way of working, approaching and solving a problem, and learning the requirements of his job.

ACCESS to allow a report to seek guidance, ask questions, pursue a line of thinking or problem-solving will enable both parties to understand the parameters of the relationship and facilitate their understanding of each other. As there will always be times when the ability to communicate is challenged, when exigencies do not permit ACCESS, the effort to permit, on the one hand, and to seek, on the other, continuous ACCESS to the manager for her report goes a long way to making both parties comfortable with the other.

Consider an environment when a manager does not grant easy ACCESS to those who report to her. Questions can linger, misunderstandings can be compounded, an approach to a problem can go off-kilter. This might not be pretty.

The next two words – AUTHORITY and ACCOUNTABILITY – are two sides of the same coin. Many might argue that one should not exist without the other; I suggest that one actually ***mandates*** the other.

AUTHORITY comes with boundaries. A company cannot delegate without limits, and a manager becomes a micro-manager if she does not allow her subordinates to assume certain levels of authority. Having AUTHORITY presupposes that the company mission and the appropriate parameters are both clear. Delegating AUTHORITY says that a manager is comfortable that her team member understands the timing of a task, its benefit to the group, and the risks if the task is not completed. It means, most critically, that the manager trusts that the team member can, indeed, fulfill the task at hand.

The team member accepts the AUTHORITY and expects to be able to run the job, supervise the allocation of team members to its fulfillment and approach the means to the desired end as he or she feels is appropriate.

AUTHORITY has an analog, a yin to its yang. That Siamese twin is ACCOUNTABILITY. If you seek AUTHORITY, then you should be prepared to accept ACCOUNTABILITY for how you used your AUTHORITY.

The company or manager who holds his subordinate ACCOUNTABLE for something while not giving her the AUTHORITY to accomplish that task is creating a disgruntled employee . . . and, likely, a muddled task. The employee who chooses not to be ACCOUNTABLE for steps taken under her guidance cannot be trusted with the AUTHORITY to take those steps in the first place.

Simply put –

> ***(1) Delegate AUTHORITY, hold the subordinate ACCOUNTABLE <u>but</u>***
>
> ***(2) Do not blame the subordinate for an effect if he does not have the power to provoke the cause.***

The next two words are also related, so much so that I always have a self-debate as to which should go next and which, last. The final two words are INCENTIVE and MOTIVATION. Frankly, I prefer this order. INCENTIVE is easy. INCENTIVE is what pays your bills and keeps you there; INCENTIVE is financial. Whether your compensation is objective – hourly pay, annual salary, salary plus an objective bonus, commission-based – or subjective -- salary plus a subjective bonus, variable compensation for differing works, being a consultant, your financial INCENTIVE is what, presumably, brings you back, sometimes against your better judgment or even when you think – as we all tend to do on occasion – that you are underpaid.

A cynic might say that an employer's responsibility is to pay you just enough to create the inertia that prevents you from leaving, just enough to keep you from breaking out of the force field that economically holds you to your place in the organization. But, I am not a cynic when it comes to INCENTIVE. I believe that the financial INCENTIVE that binds you to a company should be measured against a number of factors, including your value to the organization.

Remember, it's you who wants AUTHORITY and submits to being held ACCOUNTABLE, so your value is something you should want to be measured. However, how you are measured should be discussed and understood between you and your manager or, if you are the manager, between you and your subordinates.

Let someone know or inquire for yourself whether your company's financial results, your division's financial results, your department's financial results might have a direct, calculable impact on your own financial results – on your personal INCENTIVE. Whether it is objective – if we achieve 110% of our goals, you will get X% above your target bonus – or subjective – if we achieve 90% of our target goals, you will be eligible for a discretionary bonus --, you should have some notion of what the INCENTIVE will be and you, as manager, owe it to your subordinates to let them know. And, know early.

The bar should not be changed if, as one approaches year-end, the numbers are too good to pay out so much, or, as many do not get bonuses, the salary or hourly wage increases may seem too large.

Watch for what I refer to as ***perverse*** INCENTIVES: these are cast as financial incentives but may not be best for the company. For example, I was in a bonus environment where my bonus was contingent on number of deals accomplished; however, if I used good judgment to say that a certain deal was not good for the company, I was not similarly rewarded. The potential result from that would be that I – or any person so incented – might be inclined to push deals that ***could*** get done, regardless of whether the long-term impact was beneficial.

I would get my financial reward – my INCENTIVE – currently, with minimal consequence if the deal proved not so favorable a year or two or five down the road.

This discussion intersects with my earlier comments about AUTHORITY and ACCOUNTABILITY: *Was I being tasked to use my AUTHORITY (and judgment and experience) to kill a deal that was not good for the company while being held ACCOUNTABLE in a negative sense that I might* ***not*** *reach the goals necessary to earn the bonus for getting deals done?*

MOTIVATION is the non-financial aspect of getting out of bed and going to work every day. MOTIVATION is the touchy-feely aspect of working with people in an environment where you want to feel – or make someone else feel – valued, wanted, included, supported.[i] MOTIVATION is the pat on the back or the "*attagirl*" that we all need, whether manager or report. This one is more on the manager, as she sets the tone for a group dynamic.

Daniel Goleman, a former New York Times journalist-turned-author and speaker, has applied the term *"Emotional Intelligence"* to the ability to hit the right note in dealing with other people, in facilitating a group dynamic to encourage belonging and supportive behavior, in understanding when someone else is up and when he is down. MOTIVATION in the workplace is an element of Emotional Intelligence that can and should be present in your manager.

Showing legitimate concern for your subordinates, understanding their personal needs, treating them with respect and dignity, and giving due credit to their commitment to the job, all encompassed with an occasional word of guidance, encouragement, praise or gratitude (and, if one is a good manager, constructive criticism would be wound up in this, too) – that's the personal MOTIVATION that creates a non-financial incentive to keep going back.

So, there are . . . my 5 words:

ACCESS
AUTHORITY
ACCOUNTABILITY
INCENTIVE
MOTIVATION

If you are a manager, think of these 5 simple words when you interact with your reports. If you can apply them, they will think more highly of you, and you will be much happier with them.

If you are the subordinate, I cannot assure your happiness if you are in a position that has all these five characteristics. However, I ***can*** assure you, though, if any of these is missing, you likely will be unhappy or, at best, highly frustrated, and this anxiety becomes particularly more acute the higher you go in an organization.

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[i] There is also the MOTIVATION that is internal in, one hopes, each of us – the motivation to perform a task efficiently and successfully, to achieve a goal, to create an innovative solution to a problem. These two types of MOTIVATION are not exclusive to each other; in fact, they may be related (consider, for example, a manager who encourages a report to create a new approach to a challenge). While the internal MOTIVATION may be enhanced or depressed by one's manager, it is not altogether derived from a superior-subordinate dynamic.