

“The challenge and opportunity is for South African managers to learn the art and science of good management.”

“I want a business where I have no employees and have no dealings with customers” said a client over coffee last week. Just I was about to erupt into laughter, I realised he was not joking. He was adamant that the pain of doing business came solely from dealing with people.

He loved his product, felt very cozy in front of his immaculate spreadsheets but got very frustrated with how people slowed everything down, complicated the simplest of tasks and pulled energy from him he did not have in the first place. Problems and people go hand in hand.

I realise that he speaks on behalf on many. Service?

What service? As a South African consumer, I get very frustrated with other peoples' employees. I am flabbergasted if I cannot catch the eye of the five waiters in a quiet coffee shop, and very annoyed if I have to walk over to ask for a menu, while promising myself not to come back here ever again. I want to scream out of pure frustration when I stand in a long queue at a big sports retailer to pay for goods because one till is open and three managers and ten other staff members walk around doing nothing. No-one jumps in to help; no-one rushes over to alleviate the problem.

So, do we sit back and sigh deeply as we sip coffee, contemplating the inherent inability of people (in their broadest definition) to make our businesses flourish? Worse still, do we allow these experiences to

inform and fuel prejudices about our South African workforce?

The antidote to poor productivity is within our reach.

If we do, we miss the dynamics of human productivity completely. If we do, we make the wrong assumptions about human nature. If we do, we are in deep trouble when it comes to growing an economy that can be adequately competitive.

The problem is not the incompetence of waiters or sales staff and their managers. The problem is that they are not managed in the true sense of the word. Productivity is at the core of being human.

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Productivity SA elaborates on the definition of productivity – it is first and foremost the continual improvement of performance (<http://www.npi.co.za/>). Imagine that! I sit in a coffee shop and not only is the service basically good but also every time I go back I can see the waiters getting better and then a little better still.

Consider our workforce idiosyncrasies. In South Africa we tend to use the American models when it comes to people practices, yet the underlying dynamics and characteristics of our workforce are completely different. We set up contracts and use rating systems that do not encourage what we need most: a learning workforce. Development of

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competencies is everything, but most organisations still measure people on how they perform compared to a job description.

It is at this point that we lose all opportunity to engage people, to energise them and to cultivate productivity, not to mention self-confidence. In a country like America this practice would make more sense: there is an assumption of a level of expertise and experience that can be “taken for granted”, but this is very far away from reality in South Africa.

We have a long road to travel when it comes to the development of broad-based competencies. We cannot find the depth of skills we need in most industries through recruitment; we need to develop them. Yet we manage and measure their performance as if they do have those competencies to begin with. It makes no sense and works against the process of skills development in general.

In South Africa we need to nurture talent. Not just the talent of super-talented individuals, but talent in its broadest definition. We need to shift our measurement from outcome only to how much the employee has developed in that time. We have to make development of the individual the end and the task itself the means to an end. We have to see the overriding goal to be the development of our people and the consequence of this the success of our business. While we focus on the outcome of tasks and business performance, we miss the core of

what we need in South Africa to set us up for a global future.

What we need is a big shift in attitude and assumption about what our people mean in our organisations. Managers need to hook each employee in so they feel passionate about the business strategy because there is something in it for them as individuals. If the organisation's people practice systems (the performance management practices) allow this, you as an individual manager can manage with this spirit and attitude and you will facilitate commitment, loyalty and productivity from the people you lead.

One of South Africa's great leadership researchers, Eetsko Schuitema, summarises the essence of how to motivate people: on the one side, managers need to genuinely care for the individual and understand their needs or idiosyncrasies; and secondly, great managers know just how to keep people challenged and “on edge” with tasks. The moment a person is bored, you lose all creative energy and deep interest in the action required.

You can think about your own motivation levels: it is directly related to how challenged you feel – without that unmistakable feeling of “oh goodness can I actually do this?” we seem to lose our edge and tend to get lazy or bored.

But let's get more practical: what are a few key things a manager can consider and do?

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1. Create the right foundation with your intention.

Check your own intention: are you there to get something from your direct reports or are you there to give them something? If you are there to give, your intention and the quality of your interaction with them, will change radically. This first step is the most important – it sets up the tone of the relationship as either purely transactional (I do a, b and c if you give me x and y in return) or it can lay a foundation where people go the extra mile for each other: in other words, people do and put in more than what is required, because they want to. It is not just a job.

2. Be realistic about the power balance.

Check your assumptions about employees and employers: who has the power when? I often see that employers (managers) can be quite arrogant about what they provide. There is an undertone of “people should consider themselves lucky to have a job” or “we are the ones who provide you with a living, so you better pull up your socks and do what we require”. Although all leaders say the right things about how important people are, they still actually feel – deep down – that employees are the lucky ones to have this opportunity.

The reality is that more than 95% of all tasks fulfilled by people come from a grey mass owned by the employee: the brain. Karl Marx stated that it is vital that the workers must own the means of produc-

tion – and in the modern era that is exactly the status: workers own their own brains, and brain power is the fuel of the economy. Employees alone determine how much effort, creativity and initiative to use. No manager can switch it on or off. Managers can, however, make the mindshift to understand that they are purely facilitators of other people’s brainpower. And brains function well under very specific circumstances.

So when it comes to the power balance, employers have the power of remuneration and opportunity. Employees, however, are equally powerful: they have the power of discretion, skill, creativity, initiative, commitment to the task and intelligence.

In their book, *Funky Business*, Nordstrom and Ridderstrale define power as “controlling the scarcest of resources: human intelligence” (page 26).

If managers can work with their people with this fact in mind, the relationship is set up well. The respect is mutual.

3. Contract upfront and create clarity.

Set the relationship up for success by investing time upfront with your people. Contract properly. So many of the issues that cause conflict or confusion down the line are preventable by stating clearly what the expectations, rules, needs and parameters are.

A manager–employee contract consists of four aspects or phases:

A: A compelling goal and context.

1.The context of this role – where it fits into the larger strategy and the structure

2.The vision of the company and how this role supports and drives that vision

3.The description of the role/job

4.The goal to be achieved by a specific date – make sure this goal is a far enough stretch for this person, but not too far. The idea is to cause tension and healthy stress, not throw people into a deep end that will drown them.

5.How this goal will be measured (make sure this is also linked with development throughout the year)

Make sure that what you measure in the end really is consistent with the behaviour you require. What we ask of people is often not even linked to what we choose to assess in the end – this in itself is a very loud mixed message.

B: Clear rules of engagement.

1.The values of the organisation and why they exist.

2.The code of conduct.

3.How often you two need to meet (this is based on manager and employee need).

4.When to escalate issues (what the red lights are).

5.The budget allowed.

6.The processes that must be followed and why.

7.The systems that must be used and why.

8.The discretion allowed when it comes to decision making (the freedom to act independently)

9.Quality requirements.

C: A development plan that will enable the employee to achieve A and B above, taking into account the following aspects:

1.The gap between the current competencies and what is required.

2.Personal development needs

3.Training in systems or processes.

4.How these needs will be addressed, when and by whom.

5.Coaching needs you as manager need to fulfill, and how often that coaching will take place

6. The things the employee may need (infrastructure, equipment and so on).

D: The consequences (positive and negative).

1.What happens if things go really well and the person develops and delivers.

2.What happens if, due to circumstances outside of the person's control, the goal is not reached.

3.What happens if there is poor delivery and very little growth due to factors within the control of the employee.

4.What happens if the rules and parameters are not adhered to as agreed in the contract.

5.How these issues will be addressed.

Once these four aspects are mutually clear, the road ahead is paved.

4. Implement the contract immediately

Keep the contract alive by acting on the promises made

both ways. Hold people to the contract and give recognition for actions that support the contract.

Follow up with people as often as is required by the individual's level of experience. There is no one rule that fits all. When it comes to people, you need a highly customised approach that will result in energy and motivation. Do the things you promised, have the meetings as promised, measure like you said you would, and give feedback when it is due.

5. Create the right environment for brainpower to work.

People have great potential, but very few people are able to unlock it on their own. What do people need to give freely of what they have to offer? Here are some suggestions.

a) Believe in them. There is nothing like belief to bring out the best in people.

b) Weekly feedback. These can be one-minute informal conversations (three pieces of good feedback for every piece of constructive criticism).

c) Consistent messages. What is said in the contract must be reinforced: nothing is quite as demotivating as shifting goalposts, mixed messages and confusion.

d) Care about people – genuinely. Are they doing ok? Are they challenged enough?

e) Stay close enough to them to know when they need greater challenge. Inject healthy stress throughout the year. Boredom is a no no.

f) Have some spontaneous fun with people and live a little. Laugh, don't take everything so

seriously – especially yourself.

g) Learn from your people and say when you do. Share when they do things that make you reconsider things or when you can take a page out of their book.

h) Say sorry when you make a mistake. The boss also makes mistakes. It sends out the message that learning is allowed and that people need not feign perfection.

i) Appreciate little things.

j) When there is conflict, do not sweep it under the carpet. Frustrations that get ignored will fester and steal energy from the whole team.

k) When you do not like something, say so with respect.

Are you equipped to empower, motivate and develop the talent in your team?

You can make a significant difference in your team, your unit, your organisation and the economy as a whole if you work at developing your personal capacity to unlock the scarce resource of human intelligence.

Resources:

Riddertrale, J. & Nordstrom, K. (2008). *Funky Business*. Prentice Hall, Financial Times, Suffolk.

Schuitema, E. (2000). *Leadership: The Care and Growth Model*. Ampersand Press, Cape Town.