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What Challenges will Managers Face in 2012?

Every manager wants to be a better leader and boss. There are hundreds of books written every year with new-and-improved tips to encourage and empower, reward and respect your employees. Each one offers some new perspective or kernel of wisdom that can help a manager change the way they think about a person or problem. Yet, after years of striving for perfection, managers are still looking for ways to better steer their ship through the troubled waters of today's increasingly competitive marketplace.

That's because while the principles of good management don't fundamentally change, the economic and cultural circumstances that employees face do shift from year to year. Those challenges provide opportunities for management to address the concerns of staffers before they manifest in to unwieldy problems. "Your business will grow successfully and flourish within a highly competitive market by having reliable and effective managers who impress upon their employees that they are leaders and a source of guidance," says Rich Trelford, an employment consultant with **vpi**. Inc. Trelford's company provides a range of employment facilitation services to companies to help them achieve peak performance.

Trelford says it's important to see this development of employees as a collaborative effort and points to the wisdom offered by his own author of choice, Peter Drucker, whom he says is the father of modern management. "The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say 'I.' And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say 'I,'" writes Drucker in his book, *The Essential Drucker: The Best of Sixty Years of Peter Drucker's Essential Writings on Management*. "They think 'team.' They understand their job is to make the team function. [Managers] accept responsibility and don't sidestep it, but 'we' gets the credit... This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done."

To do that, managers need to be aware of current challenges facing their staff. This year, one of the most talked about workplace concerns is employee burnout. That breakdown is often caused by stress, but while a stressed out employee will feel overwhelmed and pressured by striving to tackle a seemingly insurmountable workload, one who is burned-out may just want to give up and will lack the motivation to try harder. Burned out employees are just exhausted; they may withdraw from responsibilities or emit audible sighs.

According to some professionals, the number of these tired employees are increasing - so what can a manager do? Being mindful of the problem can help, but so can encouraging employee fitness programs at work. Sharon Toker, a professor at Tel Aviv University, and research partner Michal Biron, of the University of Haifa, discovered that workers who participated in physical activity generally saw their mental health deteriorate less often than those who did not exercise or get up from their desk and stretch every once and a while. This lessened symptoms of burnout and depression. By the end of their study,

the researchers had concluded that managers would see real benefits in encouraging their staffers to engage in frequent physical including reduced health costs, absenteeism and improved productivity.

However, burnout rates are just one modern challenge. Most managers are now dealing with the added trouble of an increasingly multi-generational workplace as boomers work longer and the Gen-Ys continue to flood in. This creates unique challenges. Management consultant Jim Finkelstein says that to deal with this “there are ways to influence the workplace - you just have to look through the lens of other people and understand where they’re coming from.” He says young employees often have good listening skills and tend to be more tech-savvy (which they can often easily teach older workers if asked to), while the older workers bring the experience to the table.

When management works hard to create symbiotic environment for different generations it isn’t just good for company culture, but the firm’s financial performance too. Firms that foster a workplace with a strong identity have been shown to outperform their competition. Recent research by the Great Place to Work Institute ranked the best multinational companies in the world for 2011 and technology companies with a strong culture are right near the top: Microsoft, SAS, and Google. In addition, research cited by James Heskett, a professor at Harvard, in his book *The Culture Cycle* shows that strong corporate customs can account for between 20% and 30% of a company’s accomplishments when held up against less “culturally unremarkable” competitors.

These two topics are helpful guides for 2012, but managers who want to help their employees to their full capability shouldn’t be afraid to ask for help themselves—and ask often. According to a survey done by CareerBuilder in 2011 found that 26% of managers said they, “weren’t ready to become a leader when they started managing others.” Amazingly, another 58% said they didn’t receive any management training!

If that’s true, then it’s no wonder that so many of our leaders struggle to find their footing when it comes to motivating team members, conducting effective performance reviews and managing the interaction between their peers and employees. Roberta Chinsky Matuson, a consultant and author of *Suddenly in Charge: Managing up, managing down, succeeding all around* says that a coach or mentor can help. They “are widely used across all levels of the organization to help people accelerate their development and improve their performance as leaders,” she writes. “They do this in much the same way that athletic coaches work with players: by helping you make the most of your natural abilities and find ways to work around your weaknesses.”

If your company doesn’t have a formal mentoring program (or even if it does) you may have to look outside your firm’s walls to find help. Sometimes a professional development class is a good place to start. Conversely, writes Matuson, “This must be something you personally want to do... You have to want to grow on a personal level.” Books are a good start, but the key to your future development as a first-rate manager is that energy and commitment.

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