

The Root Dilemma for Managers & How to Resolve It

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The Root Dilemma for Managers

Introduction

The word “manager” is used in this article (and throughout our written materials and website) only to refer to people who manage other people: e.g., owners of companies, executives, mid-level managers, and first-line supervisors. It is not used to mean people who are managers in title only, but who have no people reporting to them.

The Root Dilemma for all managers is this: they are responsible not only for their own work, but also for the performance of those who report to them, and all the people who report to those people, and so on. At the same time, they have no direct way to compel good performance from any of these people. In a nutshell, it is responsibility without control.

Of course managers often have authority in the sense of status: they appear higher on the organization chart than those who report to them. They can also have a kind of ultimate authority in the sense of hiring and firing. However, as new managers quickly discover, this authority is far from sufficient to ensure good

performance. Yet, despite this well-known limitation, managers are still held responsible for the performance of people over whom they have little control.

It's Irrational But Inescapable

It is irrational on three counts for a manager to hold the managers who report to him/her responsible for their teams' failures. First, any deficiency in team performance is due to both the team and its manager, not the manager alone. Second, many factors contribute to failure. Third, if the manager is to be held responsible, the manager's manager would similarly have to be held responsible by his/her manager, and so on right to the top. It is arbitrary to cut off the chain of responsibility at some level and blame the person just below the cutoff point. At the same time, this is an inescapable dilemma for managers, since there is nothing they can do to prevent their own managers from blaming them for their teams' results.

The issue of responsibility is a bit tricky. To understand it properly, it is necessary to be clear about whose point of view you are taking. If you are the manager of a team, your best strategy is not to blame the team for results, but look to see what you can do to support and improve the team's performance. After all, you only have control over your own actions, not other people's. Thus, your best bet is to assume full responsibility for the team's performance and not try to shift blame to anyone else, above or below.

Similarly, if you are a member of a team, your best bet is to take responsibility for your own work, do the best you can, and not blame other team members or your manager for the team's results.

If you are a manager of managers, your best approach is to take responsibility for the deficiencies in performance of your direct-reports' teams and do the best you can to help them help their teams achieve good results. You will not improve things by trying to "hold people accountable" (a fancy term for blaming). You will just generate resentment, overlook how you are contributing to the problem, and fail to see what you can do to help.

The Path to Management

The manager's dilemma has been obvious for decades. You would think that all managers would receive thorough training in the many skills they need before being expected to succeed at a task which is well known to be extremely difficult but critical to an organizations' success. Yet such training is rare.

How do people typically become managers? Many become managers by being promoted from within their department on the basis of seniority or being the top performer in that department. The best salesman on a sales team becomes the sales manager, often to the great detriment of the team's performance, because this person is no longer able do much selling.

When people are promoted to manager, what kind of training in management skills do they usually receive? A one-day motivational seminar, a short book of tips, a little advice from their manager, or nothing. What about MBA programs? Do they prepare people well in the practical skills needed by managers? Hardly.

Management Training

So what are new managers to do? They have to fend for themselves. Some model their management style and behavior on their own manager or other managers in the company, which is often the blind leading the blind. Others pick up a popular book on management. These endless lists of superficial tips and tricks are often rehashes of the same old thing, and at other times contradictions of each other. They rarely help. They rarely work. Still other managers are sent to quickie "seminars"—usually warmed-over material from the popular management books in an easier-to-digest format.

Those who try to apply ideas from such sources learn to their sorrow that they don't work. They really can't work, because what a manager needs is not tips, but skill. You don't get skill from reading a list of tips and other quickie advice. The best you could hope for from reading is to gain some knowledge, but in this particular field, sound information is very hard to come by. This is not a field noted for high quality scholarship and research, or sound, well-grounded theory

and practice. Quite the contrary. This is a field noted for the absence of all those things—a field famous for fads, ill-considered research, unsubstantiated speculation, and absence of sound theoretical framework.

So what managers get when they look for help is mostly misinformation: things that if tried don't help at all or only make things worse. After such experiences, many become discouraged, cynical, and resigned to their fate.

The Experience of Being a Manager

Let's paint a picture of the work life of a typical manager, as it seems to them. A truck arrives at your office every morning and dumps a big pile onto your desk. You labor all day long—despite continual interruptions—to get rid of as much of it as possible. Next morning, the next truck arrives. It's a constant struggle to keep your head above water.

Because companies usually lack real understanding of management, its functions, and the time it requires to do it right, managers are often expected to keep doing some or even all the work they did before they became managers and just add all these new management responsibilities on top. Managers quickly learn that they can't do both. Of course, it is the management functions which are usually neglected.

As a result, the most common emotion managers struggle with every day is feeling overwhelmed. Their main need is for relief—to get some of this load taken off them. Their second need is for more efficiency to cope with this overload. A third need is to organize and prioritize this big pile of work, so that urgent and important things don't get lost in the hustle and bustle.

What Managers Don't Know Can Hurt Them

Managers frequently are not even told clearly what is expected of them: what their responsibilities are, what their tasks are, or what their main functions are. Few managers are able to list clearly, succinctly and accurately what their job

actually entails. That's a terrible state of affairs: trying to succeed at a job without really knowing what it is.

Managers often find themselves in the dark about what's really happening, how things are going, what kind of progress is being made, what people are doing, and what they're not doing. This is chiefly the result of not having time to set up the kinds of communication, collaboration and information systems needed to stay on top of what's really going on.

Worries & Frustrations

Managers can find themselves living in a chronic state of anxiety: its hard to sleep at night, hard to stop worrying about things, especially when you don't have the information that you need to relieve your mind.

Managers often have to put up with chronic frustration. It seems no matter how hard they work, how long they stay at night, how many weekends they work, it's never enough. No matter how hard they try to "motivate" their employees, hire the right people and fire the wrong people, organize and reorganize and reorganize, hold meetings, design incentives, and try everything they can think of, things just seem to roll along the way they always have.

Relationships

How about managers' relationships with those above and below them in their companies? Frequently, they are not so great. Managers often do not feel understood either by their employees or by their own managers. They can feel isolated, unsupported, and unappreciated.

It often seems to managers that their company doesn't understand or care about their plight, and their own manager offers little support. You're on your own, and yet when it comes time for the annual review, you are not showered with appreciation and offers of help. You are told that you need to improve this and correct that. Promotion is slow, raises are slow, and the company tries to solve its financial problems by cutting jobs, overloading everybody all the more.

Are Managers Needed?

Who Needs Managers Anyway?

Middle managers are often the first people to be fired when companies are “re-engineered,” suggesting that many companies think managers are a luxury. Are these companies right? Are managers really needed? Do they perform crucial functions? Are managers essential to the success of companies or merely a frill?

Many companies—from their executives down to their rank and file—seem uncertain about this question. After all, you sometimes hear them reason, it’s the employees who bring in the revenue for the company—people who make the products and provide the services to customers. Surely they’re the essential members of the company. The others are just overhead. Managers just push paper around, attend tons of meetings, discuss things to death, look over people’s shoulders, make a nuisance of themselves, have wacky ideas about how things really work, and so on. We can do without them. And when the company decides to cut costs, guess where they look first.

On the other hand, nearly all companies employ managers. Why is this? The management and organizational sciences have long declared that quality of management is the single most important factor in a company’s success. Is this just self-serving rationalization? Is there something about certain kinds of human-group activities that requires some form of “manager,” by whatever name?

The Importance of This Question to Managers

Why should this question be of interest to managers? I can think of several reasons. First, if there is no real need for managers, and they are only employed by companies out of slavish adherence to tradition, their continuing employment is precarious. Second, if managers do not fulfil an important function for their teams, departments, or company, it’s hard for them to feel much sense of accomplishment or satisfaction in their jobs, much less earn the respect of others.

Third, many managers may be interested in gaining some insight into the nature of teams, organizations, and human groups of all kinds, since that is the sea in which they swim. Finally, understanding the root of the need (or lack thereof) for managers may also be interesting and useful to managers, because it may help them concentrate on what is most fundamentally important about their jobs.

The Emergence of Managers in Groups Generally

What is it about some kinds of groups of people that always seems to result in the emergence of one or more “managers”? Is there something inherent in certain human groups that requires a manager? Do all groups exhibit this characteristic? Are there any groups that don’t require managers?

A cursory consideration of examples of human groups shows that not all lead to the emergence of managers, leaders, tyrants, or anything of the sort. People get together for parties, games, and a long list of activities that do not seem to produce managers. However, there are at least as many examples of human groups that do lead to managers of one kind or another: societal, governmental, military, church, business, sports, and juries, to name but a few. What differences between these two types of groups account for some having managers and some doing without?

The key factor that determines whether a group requires a manager is the presence or absence of a common purpose. When groups are just collections of individuals doing their own things, managers seldom emerge. When groups come together to accomplish something collectively, managers almost always emerge. Why is that? What is there about common purpose that requires managers?

To achieve something as a group that individuals cannot accomplish alone requires that the group become what General Systems Theory calls an “open system.” The group must be organized, communicative, and purposeful. Organized means who’s in the group and who’s not are well-defined, and its members are organized into a structure with clearly-defined relationships. Communicative means that the group shares information and reaches common understanding within the group and with important other groups (often called “stakeholders”). Purposeful means having aims that the group agrees on and supports.

Why do some individuals sometimes try to form open systems? Because they have calculated that it is a good trade (in terms of their own self-interest) to sacrifice some of their individual aims for the sake of group aims: ones they need the help of others to accomplish. For example, while every football player might like to carry the ball on every down, that's no way to win a game. Therefore, players sacrifice the individual goal of being the star on every play for the sake of winning games as a team, because they'd rather be a less prominent member of a winning team than a more prominent member of a losing one. They think it's a good trade. This trade is a prerequisite for individuals to form an open system.

Unfortunately, few groups have the development and skills needed to define their own goals, solve their own problems, and make their own decisions. In fact, accomplishing these feats requires a high level of specialized social skills. Some groups may try a bit, fail, and conclude they can't do it. Most won't even try, knowing in advance that it won't work.

What do groups typically do at this point? They look for a manager to help define goals, solve problems, and make decisions. And it works. At least, it works better than no manager at all, with the members of the group squabbling over everything and barely cooperating. This is why the emergence of managers is the usual response to a genuine need of groups that have common purposes.

The Reason for Managers in Companies

In the case of companies, the common idea is that the initiative to have managers comes from the company, rather than from its employees. After all, it is usually the company that hires the manager, offering compensation in return for producing certain results. Then it is the manager who usually hires the employees, offering compensation in return for working to produce these same results. This would seem to contradict our previous explanation of the emergence of managers in human groups generally, as arising from the needs of the group members (employees in this case). This top-down view is fine as far as it goes, but it obscures the crux of the matter. *Why* does the company hire a manager at all? Why not just hire a batch of employees to do the work to produce desired results?

The reason is that the executives and owners of the company do not believe that a team of employees will be able to accomplish these purposes alone, without managerial help. They are usually right. Few employees are able to form themselves into a well-oiled team, organize themselves, divide up the work, agree on goals and means, communicate, cooperate, collaborate, and share information effectively, solve the problems that arise, and achieve the desired results.

The reason why companies hire managers is to compensate for this inability of individuals and groups to achieve their purposes unaided. Therefore, the *basis* for procuring a manager is ultimately *the group*. The initiative does not come from the manager; the manager is not seeking out the group and offering aid.

This is perhaps a tricky point, so here is another way of putting it. The claim is not that groups typically form themselves, decide on common purposes, and hire their own manager—although this may occasionally happen. It is that individuals choose to make an employment bargain with a company, in which they agree to accomplish some company aims in return for compensation. This is their free choice. They could work for a different company if they chose. When they accept this bargain, they have some vested interest in accomplishing these group purposes. Since, however, they are usually unable to accomplish them without some managerial help, the need for a manager can fairly said to originate in the group's desire to accomplish common purposes and its need for a manager to help it do so.

The Management Contract

To achieve their agreed-on common purposes, individuals usually have to cede some authority to their managers and submit to their decisions. Only the group itself—not the company—can truly give this kind of authority to its manager. People have to be willing to go along with decisions, work towards goals, and implement solutions to problems. No company can force them to do so. In return, the manager agrees to take over a large portion of the responsibility for the group's success in achieving its common purposes: either to ensure its success or

to take the blame (and pay the price) for its failure. This is the implicit contract between the group and the manager, whether or not explicitly stated or realized.

The specific responsibilities the manager is accepting include everything needed for the group to achieve its purposes: to launch the group and get its work going, to preserve the group, to improve it, and to help it develop its abilities. These require that managers do some of the work themselves, assist members of the group and coach them in improving skills needed for the group to succeed.

The company, for its part, blesses the manager's authority and promises the manager some compensation, perks, and a Christmas bonus for good behavior.

Problems Resulting from Lack of Clarity

The Management Contract is usually a fuzzy contract: not written down, without all terms clearly spelled out, often not verbalized at all. This fuzziness can be a source of many subsequent misunderstandings, conflicts, and problems within the group and between employees, their manager, and the company.

When groups forget the basis for their relationship with their manager—or fail to understand it in the first place—they can slip into thinking their manager was forced on them by the company without any benefit to the group. They can become resentful of the manager's authority and blame the manager for forcing them into subordinate roles and for the group's failures. They can easily forget why the manager is there and that the group needs the manager's help. No wonder managers often feel unappreciated.

It is important for the group to be clear about its common purposes, and that these purposes are the ones the group truly wants (for whatever reason). It is difficult for a group or its manager to appreciate the group's need for managerial help without clarity about the purposes for which the group needs that help.

It is also crucial for expected results to be clearly spelled out, thoroughly understood by everyone involved, and completely and wholeheartedly agreed to by everyone in the group. Without such clarity and agreement, how can managers or team members know what is expected of them, what results they are to produce, or what constitutes success?

It might be helpful for teams to try going it alone for a short time with no help from their manager. They will quickly see what collaboration problems arise and how well they can handle them. This could lead to a new appreciation of the realities of the team's situation and their need for managerial help.

Managers' Root Dilemma Arises from the Contract

The root dilemma for managers is the direct outgrowth of the management contract and the results a manager has undertaken to produce. In its shortest form, it is this: responsibility without control.

The universal presence of the Root Dilemma for Managers shows that the management contract is an *unfair* deal. It is one-sided and unbalanced. The things groups and companies promise managers are *insufficient* to enable managers to meet their part of the bargain: namely, to ensure that the group accomplishes its purposes. The authority granted to managers does not enable them to ensure the level of individual and collaborative performance needed from the group to succeed. They cannot compel their team to do anything, much less perform well and achieve desired results. Managers often are also asked to compensate for the group's deficiencies in skill and determination. How to accomplish this miracle?

Groups without Managers

Before moving on to Part III and resolving the Manager's Dilemma, we should briefly consider whether there are ever groups with common purposes that do not need managers? Yes, although rarely. It requires that every (or nearly every) member of the group have the requisite individual and social skills to handle the organizational, communication, problem-solving, goal-achieving, and decision-making tasks and issues that continually arise in every organization. Only groups with such high levels of skill in these critical areas can function successfully as "self-directed teams," as they are sometimes called. Without such skills, management without managers is an illusion. Either someone is really managing without admitting it, or the success of the group is in serious doubt.

How to Resolve the Root Dilemma for Managers

Functions, Skills, & Support

Resolving the Manager's Dilemma begins with knowing what to do: the essential functions managers need to attend to, so their teams can succeed. This part of the article will focus on laying out and explaining these functions.

However, managers also need to develop adequate skill in these functions. Managers especially need organizational, communication, and planning skills to make up for the group's lack of these skills, and to encourage and help the group become an effective team and accomplish their common ends. The less skilled their group, the more skilled the manager must be to compensate.

Fortunately, there are a number of general-purpose skills—such as communication skills and analytical skills—that apply to many of the functions. This means that there are fewer skills to develop than there are functions. This article does not take up these general-purpose skills, but information about many of them will be found in other sections of the website.

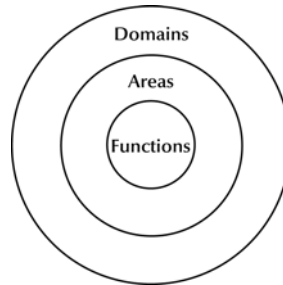
Finally, experienced managers know all too well that they are not operating independently, but are dependent on the rest of the company. Their own managers and upper management, as well as their peer managers in other departments or teams, can make their jobs much easier or nearly impossible. From the rest of the company, managers need understanding, resources, help, and the opportunity to delegate some of their load at times. This article does not go into ways to obtain this support. Again, other parts of the website address these issues.

A Holonarchy of Management Responsibilities

Knowing what to do as a manager is a difficult problem. On the one hand, there seem to be a million things that have to be done. This could (and often does in books) result in a long list of must-do functions, way beyond managers' ability even to remember, much less stay on top of. On the other hand, the Root Dilemma boils down the whole managerial problem to a single issue: responsibility without

control. But this is obviously too general and abstract to serve as a guide to what a manager needs to do every day.

The right level of specificity for a practical model is a three-level holonarchy:



The most general holon—Domains—are the three defining properties of open systems (introduced briefly above). All open systems require organization, communication, and common purpose. Therefore, the three Domains of managerial functions are The Organization, Communication, and Purposes.

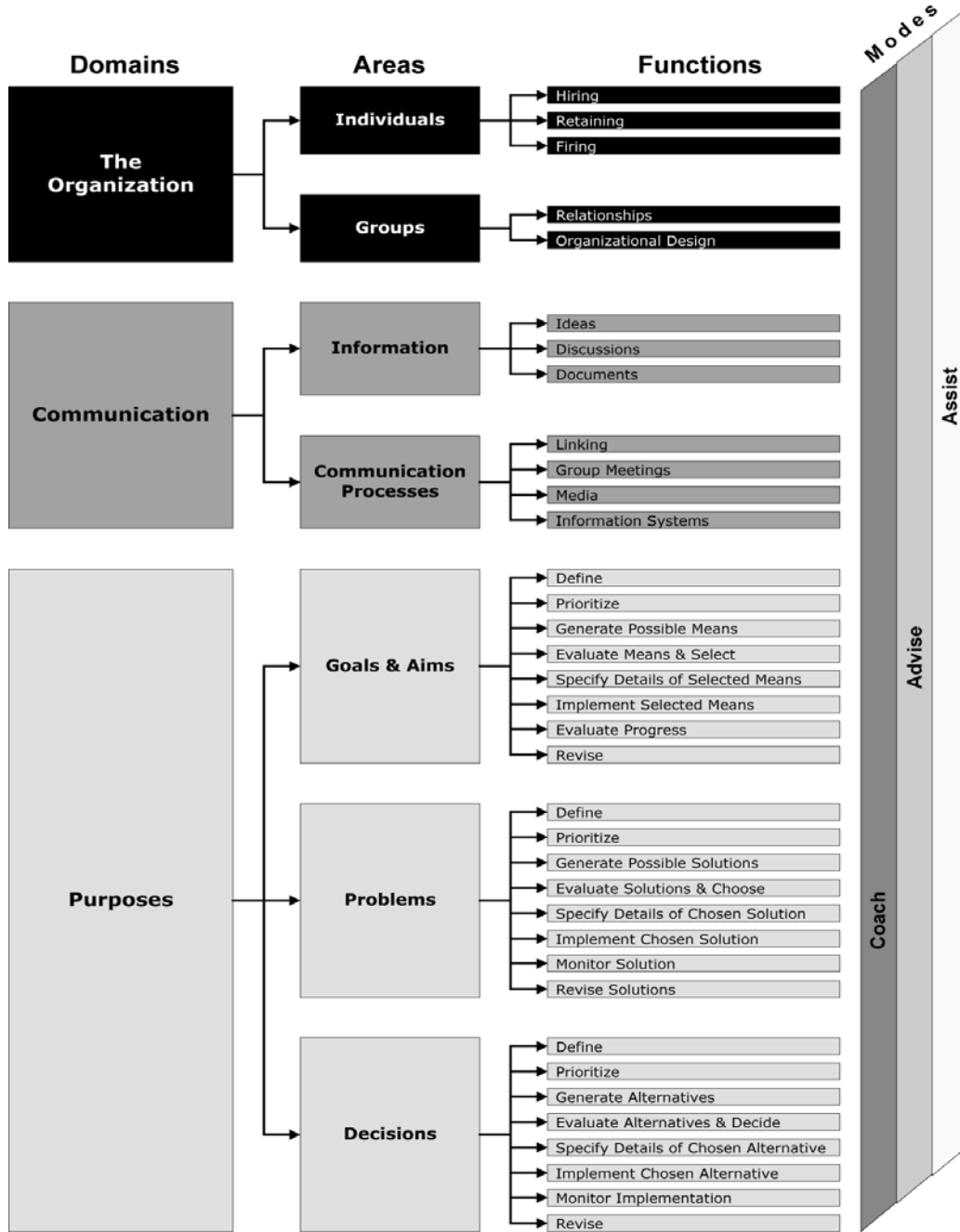
Within each Domain are two or three Areas. These break down the Domain into the next level of specificity to focus on. The Organization consists of individuals and groups. Communication consists of information and communication processes. Purposes consists of goals/aims, problems, and decisions.

Finally, within each Area are several actual Functions: particular activities managers engage in to take care of these Areas. For example, the way managers work on communication processes are to link, hold meetings, ensure proper use of media, and have effective information systems for their teams.

Additionally, all these Functions can be done in one of three Modes: Coach, Advise, or Assist. That is, managers can coach team members to help them improve their individual and group skills, advise team members to help them with their work, or just do the work themselves. The work they do themselves is either Managerial work or Nonmanagerial work. Managerial work consists of anything in the map except the Implementing functions in the three Purpose Areas: the means to accomplish goals/aims, solutions to problems, and the chosen alternative for decisions. Nonmanagerial work means the “proto” work of the team (e.g., selling for a sales team).

The Comprehensive Map of Management

We call this model of managerial functioning “The Comprehensive Map of Management.” Here it is:



Additional information about this map, its uses for managers, detailed explanations of the Domains, Areas, and Functions, skills involved in using it, the origins and foundations of the map, alternatives to this particular way of organizing managerial activities, and an evaluation of the quality of this map can all be found in the Cognitive Maps section of the website.

Using the Map to Resolve the Root Dilemma

How can managers use The Comprehensive Map of Management to help them resolve their Root Dilemma? When managers understand the true nature of the dilemma they face, as well as precisely what their teams need them for, it enables them to get very clear about the essence of their jobs. They can hire people who are competent at the individual tasks the team needs. But it is unlikely that they will find many people to hire who are also skillful at the interpersonal functions a team needs: organizing the team, communicating, collaborating, coordinating, planning, problem-solving, and making team decisions. Therefore, it is up to the manager to fulfill these functions for the team, and this is the main reason the manager is there.

The Root Dilemma is, in one sense, that managers are trapped between upper management above and their teams below. Upper management holds them responsible for their team's success, while their teams are not capable of (and sometimes not desirous of) achieving this success alone.

Therefore, there are two types of resolution to this dilemma. One is to get upper management to relieve managers of at least some of this responsibility. The other is to get their teams to succeed somehow. Of the two possibilities, the first is unlikely to happen, much less last for long. The second is much more likely and far preferable in the long run. If the team succeeds, the team will be satisfied, upper management is likely to be satisfied, and the manager will be satisfied.

The question then becomes this: how can managers get their teams to succeed? They cannot force them, and bribery doesn't work well for long. The answer is to hire and retain the right people required for the work and to provide them with everything they need to succeed that they cannot supply on their own. These

needs are all included in the Comprehensive Map of Management, with nothing unnecessary added.

By attending to the Domains and Areas in the Map and using the Three Modes of managing to fulfill the Functions the team needs to make those Domains and Areas succeed, managers will be doing all they can to ensure high performance.

Getting Help

Fortunately, managers do not have to do all of this alone. Team members can learn to take over more and more of these managerial Functions themselves. That is why the Advice mode pays off more handsomely over time than the Assist mode, and why the Coach mode pays off more handsomely still. As teams take over more of these Functions, managers' responsibility becomes ensuring that the Domains and Areas are being attended to—regardless of who is attending to them.

Delegating more and more of these responsibilities to the team requires that managers shift more and more of their efforts from doing the proto work of the team themselves to Advising and Coaching their teams. The best place to start is to work towards delegating as much Nonmanagerial Work as possible (the implementation of means, solutions, and decisions). This frees managers up to do what only they can do: manage. The second step is to pass on as much of the management work to the team itself. This usually requires considerably more Advising and Coaching than delegating Nonmanagerial Work.

In Sum

Unfortunately, there is no shortcut to this success—no quick fix for the Manager's Root Dilemma. It requires time, effort, and determination to develop necessary skills, obtain company support, and attend to the essential functions of management. At the same time, the place to start is to understand the fix that managers are inevitably in, how they got there, and what to do about it. The aim of this article is to help clarify these issues. They are meant to be a good starting

point. I encourage all managers to take heart, face the reality of their situation, and learn how to succeed.

Once more, your comments and questions would be most welcome. We'd be very interested to hear how you liked this paper, whether you found it to be valuable, or any other reactions. We'd also be happy to answer any questions you might have or discuss the ideas in this paper or how they apply to your management or organizational interests. Please e-mail us at info@developmentalconsulting.com or call (303) 468-1510. This paper is from our website, www.developmentalconsulting.com.

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