



Tips for Effective Management

By Kevin F. Supple, RSBA

Most of us are not born with keen management skills; those skills need to be learned, nurtured, and practiced over time.

School business officials' days are filled with numbers and reports—audits, balance sheets, check registers, financial statements, journal entries, vouchers, and warrant reports, just to name a few. Those are all important tools that we use to manage the financial resources of the district effectively. However, we are also responsible for managing human resources—our managers and clerks, as well as ourselves.

Most of us are not born with keen management skills; those skills need to be learned, nurtured, and practiced over time. Think of this article as a little refresher course, with tips for effectively dealing with the people side of our business.

At the outset, I want to say that there's nothing magic in the points I make; they're things I learned and borrowed during my career. But I do hope that the information provided will give you some tools to help you better manage the most valuable resource we have: our people.

Communicate

To be a successful manager, you need to be a good communicator. We have all heard of or participated in the exercise in which a story is told by one person to another, and then passed through the group; the last person typically reports a very different story from the original. As managers, we need to ensure that our message gets through and isn't "lost in translation." The concept is simple, but communicating effectively takes real effort.

One way to monitor the effectiveness of our communication is to ask questions. I attended a workshop at the 2006 ASBO Annual Meeting entitled "Smart Questions: Essential Strategies for Successful Leaders." Dorothy Leeds, a sales and communications consultant, outlined the Seven Deadly Sins of

Communicators:

1. We talk too much.
2. We don't listen enough.
3. We ask too many closed-ended questions.
4. We answer our own questions.
5. We stop asking after the first question.
6. We rush and forget the purpose of our conversation.
7. We have a fear of silence.

Questions are powerful because they demand answers; they supply valuable information; they stimulate thinking; and they force us to listen. It's not enough just to ask questions, however. To be a better communicator, we need to challenge ourselves not only to ask more but to ask better, or "smart," questions. A smart question has a purpose and helps us get closer to the answer we want and the answer we need.

One of the powerful attributes of smart questions is that they help build connections. There are three elements related to this power of questions. First, even the most reticent people will open up if you ask the right questions. Second, most people prefer talking to listening. If you are doing all the talking, then others are doing all the listening. Third, questions show that we are interested in what others have to say. As the saying goes, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

When our employees come to us with questions, we often feel a responsibility to provide all the answers. We need to change this mind-set and learn to develop the asking habit. The next time an employee comes to you with a problem, ask, "How would you go about solving this problem if I weren't available to talk to you about it?" This question encourages creativity and can empower the employee to find the answer himself or herself. Be prepared to hear, "I don't know; that's why I came to you." Fair enough. But

if the asking habit is practiced over time, we can encourage our employees to recognize, value, and expand their own knowledge base.

Motivate

Employee motivation is another essential skill for managers. Sometimes, it takes the form of providing support through the “difficult days”—that monster payroll in June or the benefits open-enrollment period. An effective strategy addresses both the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of employee motivation.

We first need to ensure that appropriate reward systems are in place that demonstrate that we value individuals’ work. Salary is one extrinsic motivator—and a powerful one at that! But there are other extrinsic signs that show we value our employees, such as ensuring that they have the tools (computers, calculators, etc.) they need to do their jobs.

Extrinsic motivation alone is insufficient. Proper attitude is critical to a good working environment. That attitude begins with the manager. If you’re enthusiastic about your work, that enthusiasm will spread to others in the department. Learning what makes you excited about coming to work is a good place to begin to gain an understanding of what will motivate your employees.

Over the years, I have found that the education profession attracts people who want to feel they are making a difference through their work.

Helping your employees realize how their work—whether it’s writing AP checks or reconciling the bank statement—contributes to student success can go a long way toward instilling the necessary intrinsic motivation.

Educate

More and more, school business officials are coming from the corporate

world, not from the classroom. That being said, we still need to think of ourselves as teachers. We bring a certain knowledge base to our job, and we need to capitalize on the opportunities to share that knowledge with employees in our departments to help them achieve success. Moreover, we are teaching by example every day. What we do (or don’t do), what we say (or don’t say), and what we tolerate all set an example for our employees.

My parents instilled in their children at an early age that they each have a responsibility to fully develop their God-given talents. I would extend that thinking to say that, as managers, we have a responsibility to help our employees fully develop their skills and talents. One of the great strengths of Missouri ASBO is the professional development we get by learning from and networking with one another at the fall and

We need to keep driving school performance despite shrinking budgets.

- A Yes.
- B So achievement drops off a bit. That’s just called a rebuilding year, right?

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spring conferences. Bring this same model to your departments by encouraging cross-training and skill sharing.

Our community can also benefit from our expertise. We all serve as ambassadors of the district when we interact with our patrons. Find those opportunities to speak with a chamber of commerce or other community, civic, or charitable group about the great things happening in your district. Help educate the public about school funding in general and your district's situation in particular. Not only do you grow professionally, but you also help the public better understand the district's mission and vision and how it can help achieve the district's goals.

Delegate

There is no question that we are ultimately accountable for the success of our departments. However, we can share the responsibility for achieving

that success with the people we work with every day.

The cardinal rule here is to give your people the room to excel. You hire employees whom you believe have the skills necessary to do their jobs. So make sure you let them! They may take a different approach to solving a problem or completing a task than you would, but the focus should be on results, not on the process.

There will be times when the result is not what we expected. First, we need to help our employees examine their actions so they can find the problem and fix it. But second, and just as important, we need to examine our actions to see whether we were clear in communicating our expectations, whether we monitored the process appropriately, and whether we listened to our employees' questions.

Delegation has a double benefit: not only do you free yourself up to do those things that only you can do,

you also encourage creativity and help your employees grow professionally, which benefits them as well as the district.

Celebrate

We all work incredibly hard to accomplish our assigned tasks. Sometimes, we can get too involved in our daily work to adequately acknowledge our accomplishments. That can quickly sap the energy from a department. It's important to take time to thank employees for their help in reaching our goals. That appreciation can take many forms.

Employees appreciate a quiet thank-you for getting a report finished by deadline or recognition of an important personal milestone (the new grandbaby!). We can also use the department meeting or employee newsletter to celebrate important departmental accomplishments, like completing the annual audit ahead of time. And there are those major

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achievements that merit coverage in the local newspaper (e.g., an increase in the district's bond rating).

Celebration isn't just about acknowledging contributions. My district is deeply committed to the professional learning communities concept. One of that concept's tenets for sustaining improvement is celebrating success. Although celebrating is important, *what* we celebrate is critical. Our celebrations should call attention to our core mission, vision, and values, as a reminder of their importance to our overall success.

Celebration has several important benefits. It helps the recipient feel valued and appreciated. It provides clear examples of what we value and encourages others to engage in similar behavior. Celebrations are a great way to fuel the momentum of our success. And it's fun!

For more information on how to incorporate celebration in the culture of your department or district,

I recommend you read *Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker.

Recreate

One of the truisms of our jobs is that there will always be another task to accomplish, another phone call to return, another report to develop. If we only had an additional day every week, then maybe we could get caught up!

Fifteen-hour days and 80-hour weeks may seem necessary, but they can lead to long-term problems. We need to ensure that we take care of ourselves so we are best able to meet the challenges that come with our jobs. Failure to do so can lead to burnout, depression, and health problems. A burned-out employee is not going to be successful. The chance of errors increases as our energy decreases.

As leaders, we set the example for our organization. Eating properly,

getting enough exercise, and taking time off from work are all important assignments we should give ourselves—and encourage our employees to do the same. Remember, take the time to have fun!

Make Progress

My purpose in writing this article was to provide some practical suggestions to improve school business officers' management skills. If we can remember a few simple steps—communicate, motivate, educate, delegate, celebrate, and recreate—we can make significant progress toward the effective management of our most valuable resource, our people. Good luck!

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I'd like to reduce my school's risks around labor law compliance.

- A** Yes.
- B** Nothing says "fun" to me like a wage & hour audit.

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