



The Manager as IDEA COACH

by Mitchell Ditkoff

The root of the word “manager” comes from the same root as the words “manipulate” or “maneuver”, meaning to “adapt or change something to suit one’s purpose”. Although these words may carry a pejorative meaning for some of us, there is nothing inherently wrong with them. Indeed, into each life a little manipulation and maneuvering must fall. For example, if the door to your office gets stuck, a handyman might need to *manipulate* it to get it working again. If there is a log jam at the elevator, you might decide to *maneuver* around the crowd and take the stairs. No problem there.



However, there is another kind of manipulation and maneuvering that *is* a problem – when managers use their position to bend subordinates to their will. While short-term gains may result, in the end the heart is taken out of people. Your staff may become good soldiers, but they will lose something far more important in the process – their ability to think for themselves. General George Patton said it best, “*Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.*”

Unfortunately, ingenuity in many American corporations has gone the way of the hula-hoop. But intellectual capital is the name of the game these days – and it is the enlightened manager’s duty to learn how to play. *Only those companies will succeed whose people are **EMPOWERED** to think for themselves and respond creatively to the myriad of changes going on all around them.* Simply put, managers must make the shift from *manipulators* to *manifesters*. They must learn how to coach their people into increasingly higher states of creative thinking and creative doing. They must realize that the root of their organization’s problem is not the economy, not management, not cycle time or outsourcing, but their own inability to tap into the power of their workforce’s innate creativity.

Where does empowerment start? First, by recognizing what power is: “the ability to do or act”. And second, by realizing that all power begins with an idea. Clearly, one’s ability to “do or act” depends on there being something worth doing or acting upon. What *is* an idea? Where does it come from? And how can a manager increase the chances of a good one showing up?



Most managers, unfortunately, perceive new ideas as problems – especially if the ideas are not their own. Simply put, they don’t pay enough attention to the ideas of the people around them. They say they want to innovate. They say they want “their people” to do something different. But they do precious little to support their subordinates in their efforts to do so. They foist their ideas on others and can’t figure out why things aren’t happening faster. That’s not how change happens. If people are only acting out *somebody else’s* ideas, it’s only a matter of time before they feel discounted, disempowered and...well...just plain dissed. *People are more than hired hands; they are hired minds and hearts, as well.*

Let’s start with the basics. Everything you see around you began as an idea. The computer. The stapler. The paperclip, the microchip and the chocolate chip. All of these began as an idea within someone’s fevered imagination. *The originators of these ideas were on fire.* Did they have to be “managed?” No way. In fact, if they had a manager, he or she would have done well to get out of the way.

If you want to empower people, honor their ideas. Give them room to challenge the status quo. Give them room to move – and, by extension, move mountains. Why? Because people identify most with their ideas. “I think therefore, I am” is their motto. People feel good when they’re encouraged to originate and develop ideas. It gives their work meaning, makes it their own, and intrinsically motivates. Who has the power in an organization? The people who are allowed to think for themselves and then *act* on their ideas! Who *doesn’t* have power? The people who have to continually check-in with others.



Think about it. The arrival of a new idea is typically accompanied by a wonderful feeling of upliftment and excitement – even intoxication. It’s inspiring to have a new idea, to intuit a new way of getting the job done. Not only does this new idea have the potential to **BRING VALUE** to the company, it temporarily frees the idea originator from their normal habits of thinking. A *sixth sense* takes over, releasing the individual from the gravity of status quo thinking. In this mindset, the idea originator is transported to a more expansive realm of possibility. All bets are off. The sky’s the limit. All assumptions are seen for what they are – limited beliefs with a history, but no future. If you are a manager, you *want* people in this state of mind. It is *not* a problem. It is *not* the shirking of responsibility. It is *not* a waste of time. On the contrary, it’s the first indicator that you are establishing a company culture that is conducive to innovation.

This is not to say, of course, that you have to *fund* every idea that comes your way. On some level, ideas *are* a dime a dozen – and only a handful of them are ever going to amount to much. But if you treat all ideas as if they are worthless, you will never find the **PRICELESS** ones. Creativity, you see, is often a numbers game. Einstein had plenty of bogus theories. Mozart wrote some crap. But they continued being prolific. And it was precisely this self-generating spirit of creation, which enabled them to access the good stuff.



You, as a manager, want to increase the number of new ideas being pitched to you. It’s that simple. You want to create an environment where new ideas are popping all the time. If you do, old problems and ineffective ways of doing things will begin dissolving. Spontaneously. This, you see, is the hallmark of an empowered organization – *a place where everyone is encouraged and empowered to think creatively*. Within this kind of environment managers become coaches, not gatekeepers. “Coaching”, of course, has been widely written about and there are many fine books on the subject. What *hasn’t* been written about very much is how to become an “innovation coach” – how to create the kind of environment that elicits the hidden genius of the people around you. You see, it’s one thing to tell people “you want their ideas”, it’s quite another to create the kind of environment that makes this rhetoric real. *Creativity cannot be legislated. It cannot be sustained by mission statements and pep talks.* What needs to happen is *you*, as a manager, need to change the way you relate to people. Each encounter you have with another in the workplace needs to quicken the

likelihood that their unexpressed ideas will get a fair hearing – enabling a far greater percentage of them to eventually take root.

How does a manager do this? First off, by expressing a lot of positive regard. Get interested! Pay attention! Be present to the moment! This is not so much a technique as it is a state of mind. Simply put, if your head is always filled with your own thoughts and ideas, there won't be any room left to entertain the thoughts and ideas of others. It's a law of physics. Two things cannot occupy the same place at the same time. Here's an example:

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Let's say someone comes up to you in the middle of the day and says something like, "I have this great idea for a new product that will generate over \$200 million for our company." The first thing you need to do is realize the opportunity you have. An idea is about to be shared, one that may herald a breakthrough or, at the very least, solve a problem, capitalize on an opportunity, or make your life easier. Your willingness to sit up and take notice needs to be just as strong as if a customer were to call and complain. If possible, drop what you're doing, focus all of your attention on the idea generator, take a deep breath, and begin a series of questions that demonstrate your interest. If you cannot drop what you are doing, schedule some time – as soon as possible – for the idea originator to pitch you. And whether the pitch is now or later, your response – in the form of exploratory questions – needs to be as genuine as possible. Consider some of the following openers:

- ✚ "That sounds interesting. Can you tell me more?"
- ✚ "What excites you the most about this idea?"
- ✚ "What is the essence of your idea – the core principle?"
- ✚ "How do you imagine your idea will benefit others?"
- ✚ "In what ways does your idea fit with our strategic vision?"
- ✚ "If you only had 30 days to manifest your idea, what would you do?"
- ✚ "What information do you still need?"
- ✚ "Who are your likely collaborators?"
- ✚ "Is there anything similar to your idea on the market? How is yours different?"
- ✚ "What support do you need from me?"
- ✚ "What is your next step?"

Basically, you want the idea originator to talk about their idea as much as possible in this moment of truth. An idea needs to first take form in order to take root, and one of the best ways of doing this is to encourage the idea originator to talk about it – even if their idea is not yet fully developed. The telling of the idea, in fact, is not unlike someone telling you their dream. The telling helps the dreamer flesh out the details of what they imagined and the subsequent hearing of it firmly installs it in their memory – and yours – so the idea does not fade quite as quickly.

Most of us, however, are so wrapped up in our own ideas that we rarely take the time to listen to others. Your subordinates know this and, consequently, rarely share their ideas with you. *But it doesn't have to be this way.* And it won't necessarily require a lot of time on your part. Some time, yes. But not as much as you might think. Bottom line, the time it takes you to listen to the ideas of others is not only worth it – *the success of your enterprise depends on it.* Choose *not* to listen and you will end up frantically spending a lot *more* time down the road asking people for their ideas about how save your business from imminent collapse. By that time, however, it will be too late. Your workforce will have already tuned you out.



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