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MANAGING A DEVELOPMENT TEAM

As the development manager at a small company, you have a unique role not found in most large companies. Whether your title is *chief technology officer*, *vice president of engineering*, or *director*, you must connect the CEO and members of the executive team directly to your development team. In a small company, you must be able to stretch in ways that differ from those of a development manager in a large company.

Understanding Your Core Management Values

Before delving into the mechanics of managing a team, let's take an introspective look at what it takes to be an effective manager. Ask yourself how you want to work with your development team and how your core values affect how you interact with others. Your respect for others, ethics, coaching and listening skills, ability to provide feedback, and concern for the success of others all affect how you make decisions.

As a manager, you need a “toolkit” of approaches you can access when working with your team. Your toolkit should include methods for motivating people, making yourself available, choosing the team's tools, organizing the team, setting up the workspace, managing projects, resolving conflict, and communicating with your team. With multiple tools and approaches on hand, you can select the best tools for the job.

In contrast, a rigid manager might have only one tool—the one he used at the last job at the last company. But as the saying goes, *If your only tool is a saw, then the solution to every problem is to cut.*

The following sections consider the key tools and components of a set of core values: trust, flexibility, sincerity, confidentiality, respect, and empowerment.

Trust

Companies with an environment of trust are the most productive, because workers do not waste energy on politics, pointing out others' mistakes, or guarding their backsides. These companies encourage direct communication—employees trust management and each other to pass on correct information and get support for their work. This fosters high worker morale, as workers focus their energies on being productive instead of on being wary.

Employees at small companies must be able to believe what they hear from senior management, because working at a small firm can be riskier than working for a large company. Since small and growing companies often lack significant resources, a high-trust environment drives the efficiencies that are essential to success.

Employees at companies with low-trust cultures waste energy focusing on other people's mistakes and protecting their positions. Workers believe

they need to double-check the veracity of all statements from management. In such companies, management perpetuates low-trust cultures by rewarding low-trust behavior, such as political maneuvering, public verbal complaints about others, rumors, power plays to force decisions on other teams, and backstabbing. Low-trust cultures tend to breed in companies at which people are worried about losing their jobs. Management is often authoritative and political. Senior managers spend their energy pulling other people down to pull themselves up. In the absence of focused positive effort by top management, short-term advantages exist for individuals who exhibit low-trust behaviors to advance their position.

Why don't more companies create high-trust environments? Building trust requires that management make a focused effort by discussing company values and core beliefs every day and not just at yearly reviews. A high-trust culture requires that managers hire the right people, train them in company culture, and model the behaviors they expect.

LAST ONE STANDING

Our QA team consisted of six engineers, and we were good at what we did. When our QA manager left the company for another job, the VP in charge appointed a manager without QA experience and without management experience. Our team was willing to give him a chance. However, over the next four months, he managed to alienate all of us by showing no interest in quality. Gradually, the other team members found other jobs and the manager did not replace them.

I was the last QA engineer employed at the firm. I wrote an email to my manager asking him to show more interest in QA. I expressed concern over how the rest of the team had left the firm and how he had not replaced them. He fired me and had me escorted out of the building that day for insubordination. I should not have trusted him to be fair, even in a private communication.

I found out later that this QA manager quit two weeks after I was dismissed to take a management job at another company. He destroyed the QA team and then left the company.

—QA engineer

As a manager, you can build trust by exhibiting high standards of fairness, confidentiality, respect, sincerity, and conflict resolution. You deal effectively with development team members who break your trust. For example, if a team member reports to you that she has completed a task, you expect the task to be completed correctly. If you later discover she did not complete the task, you will no longer trust her. This person will be a drag on your time, as you have to inspect her work carefully to ensure that it's getting done correctly.

In high-trust environments, a development manager looks out for her team. She doesn't view the team as machinery to accomplish a job; nor does she consider her role to be simply a conduit for passing off upper-management's demands and problems to the team. Instead, she acts in the interests of both her team and her company.

Trust can appear to be an abstract concept. The following examples help to illustrate high-trust and low-trust responses to different situations:

- You are attending an executive meeting and a fellow manager mentions that one of your senior developers failed to deliver a project on time. Although marketing contributed to the delay by changing the requirements at the last minute, you and the developer agreed to make the changes.
 - **Low-trust response** Point out in the executive meeting that the marketing manager made it impossible for the developer to complete the project on time. He changed the definition too many times, running up the costs without your consent.
 - **High-trust response** Indicate that you agree that the result was unacceptable. You plan to review the project with the goal of improving future performance. You invite the marketing manager to join in the discussion.
- A developer tells you about his interest in getting a master's degree. You know another engineer who would like to join the team if a spot became available.
 - **Low-trust response** Find an excuse to lay off the engineer who spoke to you because you know he was likely to leave anyway.

- **High-trust response** Try to determine whether the engineer can attend classes while still working for your firm. Ask him to provide as much notice as possible if he decides to leave the company to pursue an education.
- Your commercial servers went down for four minutes during peak time. Your initial analysis points to an error on the operations team, compounded by a software flaw that prevented the proper system automatic recovery. You do not manage the operations team.
 - **Low-trust response** Tell the CEO about the operations team's mistake immediately while pointing out the need for the operations director to improve staff training.
 - **High-trust response** Spend some time investigating the issue with the director of operations. Then, the two of you meet with the CEO and describe the sequence of events and what steps you plan to work on jointly to prevent this from happening again.

Flexibility

A team of workers who believe they are trusted will act in a trustworthy fashion; being flexible in how you treat your team will help you build a high-trust environment. Treat members of the team as you would like your boss to treat you. Focus on individual successes as well as team successes. Developers are not just hired hands, but people with a career and a life outside of work. If you are fair and honest in your approach with them, they will generally treat you fairly and honestly in return.

You can show flexibility when a team member encounters problems or life situations that make it difficult for her to work in the usual ways. Flexibility in such a situation might mean allowing her to work from home for an extended period or allowing her to take time off. Flexibility can also mean shifting a person's working hours or shifting weekday work to weekend work short-term.

You can also demonstrate flexibility in making work assignments, making adjustments to align required work with the desires of individual team members. Each developer would then be able to focus on particular tasks that are of interest to him or her; this improves team members' morale and

usually provides valuable cross-training that does not occur if individuals focus on the same areas repeatedly.

Flexibility does not mean providing the same solutions to all team members, whether or not they have a problem. For example, if one employee has family issues that require him to work from home for a week, everyone on the team should not then be allowed to work at home. When an employee will be working remotely or at hours that differ from those of the team, tell your team about the accommodation to help them understand your decision. Of course, in some circumstances, you should leave the accommodated employee's details vaguely defined, because telling others the details would be inappropriate.

A manager's flexibility has an impact on all the other core management areas. An employee is more likely to trust a manager who shows flexibility when the employee is experiencing a situation that makes it difficult to complete work as usual.

Some employees might take advantage of your flexible approach, but having an employee take advantage of you occasionally is better than being totally inflexible. While a few individuals might be untruthful about their circumstances, most people are honest.

Sincerity

Your team members will appreciate your sincere concern for their success. You can demonstrate your concern in words and actions, but ultimately

SINCERITY IS NOT A MANAGEMENT FAD

My manager openly talks about the fact that the job we have now may not be the one we always want to have. She encourages people to explore their interests even if it means they might end up leaving the team. She continues to do this even when the company is not filling vacated positions. She constantly puts our individual best interests first and is committed to working out whatever staffing problems arise as a result. This makes us all want to keep working for her!

—Senior technical writer

WHY NOBODY BELIEVED

The management team held a company meeting to announce layoffs and budget cuts. The CEO indicated that we were forced to freeze hiring and we would have to spend money carefully until business picked up. A week later, all the company managers received Mercedes leased by the company. When asked at the next company meeting why this occurred, the CEO explained that senior executives had previously had a “car allowance” that the accountants said was not tax-deductible. So management leased the cars instead, and they happened to arrive right after the budget cuts. When asked why he did not cut this expense, his response was that this type of incentive was necessary to retain top management talent.

—Hardware engineer

your actions count. If your employees believe you are sincere and trustworthy, they are more likely to follow your direction when you are trying new approaches to solving problems rather than resisting every step of the way.

If your actions show that you are insincere, it doesn't matter how earnest you *appear* while talking to people; you will not be trusted, and you'll be far less effective as a manager, which can lead team members to undermine you. Your team will lose focus on achieving the best results for the company. Consider, for example, the case of an unprofitable company that makes budget cuts. After the manager asks his team to save money and spend only on essentials, he purchases a new computer system for his desk, even though his current system is fairly new; this manager would probably lose his team's respect and ruin his credibility.

Confidentiality

Confidence also builds trust. If an employee confides in a manager, she expects that the information will not be shared with others or used inappropriately. Unless a confiding employee commits a serious ethical breach, violates laws, or puts the company at risk, you should never share this information or use it against the person. By encouraging an environment in which people can confide in you, you can help resolve problems rather than allowing them to grow.

Consider, for example, an employee who tells you that she wants to work on a different type of project. She has spoken with other companies about potential employment. On hearing this information, some managers would immediately lay off the employee or reassign her to unimportant tasks—because she is leaving anyway. However, since the employee has voluntarily revealed this information, it shows that she trusts you, and, in fact, she might not really want to leave—she might be giving you an opportunity to change her project assignment. If she does decide to leave the company, she will likely give you time to transfer her responsibilities to others because she trusts and respects you.

Respect

Individuals on your team must be treated with respect, by you and by other developers and co-workers. Lack of respect can be shown overtly—for example, when someone verbally demeans another person face-to-face or behind the other’s back. It can also be shown in a subtle way, such as when someone belittles another person by demeaning his or her qualifications, skills, or abilities to others.

If one member of your team demeans another, pull the abuser aside and talk to him. Don’t wait for the situation to “work itself out.” Depending on the extent of the problem, you might need to involve human resources.

Build respect by creating a team environment that focuses on solving problems, not pointing out other people as problems. Encourage staff to work out problems individually, and offer assistance only when they prove unwilling or unable to do so themselves.

Empowerment

Successful developers enjoy their work and look forward to the next challenge. They are self directed and empowered because you have defined goals, stepped back, and let them succeed. Empowered workers will succeed.

In contrast, workers who feel micromanaged go through the paces, viewing work as an acceptable task in exchange for pay. They know that the tasks required by management are sometimes inefficient or useless, but they believe they are unable to change the way things are done. Management treats them like plumbers hired to clean out a drain and then go home.

To empower your team members, make sure they understand development goals and boundaries. Boundaries define reasonable limits but are never such sacred cows that they cannot be discussed or changed. Clear boundaries and flexibility to choose a solution will prevent workers from feeling micromanaged.

The following are examples of types of boundaries:

Project constraints Schedules, features, budgets, and resources

Company policies Requiring management approval for spending company funds

Technical boundaries Partner deals that force specific technology on a solution

Business boundaries Choices for specific software components that might require managerial buy-in due to ongoing excessive operational costs

Once you have set up clear boundaries, let team members choose how they will work together to reach the solution. Set the team loose, monitor progress, and coach them to success.

Communicating with Your Team

Successful communication requires that you consider what you want to say and how you want to say it—before you start talking. Your communication should be tailored to fit each situation: Realize that what might work in one environment might not be effective in another.

When communicating with your team, plan to cover project work and people topics. Project work includes development efforts to create revenue, projects to reduce risk, and strategies to improve productivity. People topics include coaching, training, correcting, answering questions, resolving concerns, discussing long-term problems, discussing new ideas, assisting with work needs, and helping with career planning.

Too often, management focuses only on project work, addressing current practical issues that drive the company's short-term success. However, failing to address other issues when communicating can lead to long-term

failures that result in decreased productivity, increased staff turnover, quality problems, missed opportunities, and morale problems. Spend at least a fifth of your communication time on efforts not tied to current projects. Consider a communication approach for project topics that differs from the tack you take for people topics; each needs its own venue to ensure that it is properly covered. The following sections discuss approaches to communicating with your team, including one-on-ones, project communication, team meetings, and informal conversations.

One-on-Ones

A weekly one-on-one meeting with individual developers gives managers the best opportunity for covering most people topics. (In contrast, team building requires team meetings to develop relationships and improve interactions.) If your team is larger than six people, you might need to limit one-on-one meetings to every other week because of the time involved.

One-on-one meetings can provide opportunities to build trust and listen to each individual's concerns. Let the employee direct the initial discussion. Try to avoid discussing current tasks and status issues at the beginning of the conversation. Sometimes developers will not be forthcoming with information, so you can help get them started by asking questions such as these:

- Do you have any concerns about your work?
- Have you experienced or noted any problems recently?
- Do you have any ideas for improvement?
- Do you need additional equipment or software?
- What are your long-term career plans?
- Do you have any ideas to share?

One-on-one meetings are ideal for discussing problems, offering advice, agreeing on solutions to problems, and sometimes assigning a task or requesting a solution to a problem. Make assignments clear, but avoid spelling out the exact details of the solution. Instead, establish agreement on what success looks like: Give the employee the authority to solve the problem, and offer advice. In general, don't immediately assign the task of

NOT LISTENING

Early in my career, I had a boss who was a poor listener. When I brought up issues to let him know what was going on, he would interrupt the discussion and start giving me instructions. He would issue orders before I was fully able to describe the problems I was trying to resolve. I stopped discussing problems with him.

—Software manager

problem resolution to the person who brought it up. If you make a habit of doing this, your staff will bring fewer problems to your attention.

If you want to use one-on-one meetings for project status updates, wait to discuss status until after you have covered the other topics. If you start with project status, updates might take up all of your meeting time and other issues will not get attention.

Project Communication

How you handle project communication depends on the size of the project and the release cycle. With short release cycles, *daily stand-up meetings*—15- to 20-minute meetings in which all participants stand—can be appropriate. The manager structures the meetings at the same time each day, asking participants to offer brief statements that describe what they did during the previous day, what they plan to do today, and any immediate help they require. Stand-up meetings are not intended as problem-solving meetings or topic discussions. Instead, any identified problems can be assigned to individuals for resolution and follow-up.

For projects with long release cycles, *weekly project status meetings* combined with visiting and talking with people at their desks can be helpful. This weekly meeting usually lasts 30 minutes to an hour. Status and schedule meetings usually involve some detailed discussions, along with plans for the next few weeks. The team identifies risks and the project manager assigns individuals to work toward mitigating those risks.

You can communicate project status to the team via intranet/wiki postings, emails, whiteboard messages, or reviews during regular status meetings. Some team members will not know the full project status or will be unaware of recent changes to the project or schedule. Not communicating the overall status to the team can lead to confusion, while clearly communicating this information improves morale and likelihood of project success. If you provide your team with regular status updates, they will be more likely to point out problems and discrepancies early on, and they'll also be more likely to get their status reports to you on time.

When communicating project status to the team, scale the content and frequency of the report to the size of the effort. The status description should include information about projects that have been recently finished, which projects will be tackled next, any product functionality that has changed, projected completion dates as of today, problems encountered, and current identified risks.

On-time project completion depends on accurate status information that allows time for the team to make midcourse corrections.

Team Meetings

Scheduling team meetings at regular intervals will enhance team cohesion and team performance. Team meetings can occur every week or every two weeks, depending on the team size. The meetings can serve as forums for discussing general concerns or as opportunities to provide training on new processes and policies. Team meetings also allow team members to discuss concerns or ask questions.

Meetings should not be ad-lib events, however, so you should prepare an agenda or list of topics in advance. Open a file on your desktop and keep it open, adding items as they come up; this file becomes the basis for the next meeting's agenda. An established agenda will help keep the meeting short and help avoid rambling discussions. Circulate the agenda in advance for an even more effective meeting.

Overly long team meetings drain energy from the team and impact your bottom line, so keep them as short as possible. Long team meetings are expensive, too—for example, a meeting that lasts 2 hours for a team of 12 takes the same amount of time as 3 engineering days (24 hours).

Allow engineers to speak about concerns such as policies and senior management decisions. Keep track of these issues and questions and review them weekly with the team, even if you do not yet have answers. Make sure you provide ongoing status of open items raised at earlier team meetings and work toward closure of issues and questions.

Occasionally, a disgruntled engineer can use a team meeting as a complaint session. If the engineer crosses the line from constructive suggestions to destructive complaining, cut the conversation short and ask him to meet with you individually to discuss his concerns.

Regular development team meetings are not good venues for detailed technical discussions. Set up separate technical meetings, during which you can focus on specific topics, and make most of these meetings discretionary, so that people who do not need to attend can opt out. Otherwise, engineers not affected by the specific technical topics will end up spending time listening to discussions that are not helpful to them.

Conflict Resolution

At some point, disagreements will arise between team members. As their manager, you should encourage them to resolve disagreements directly, rather than let disagreements impede cooperation. Typical disagreements concern such issues as technology choices, common resource usage, or inconsiderate behavior. Team members can usually work out technology and resource disagreements directly or sometimes through a moderated discussion, but inconsiderate behavior requires a different approach.

Problems between co-workers can build up to a point at which the people can no longer work together. If one person is angry at another, counsel the aggrieved party to ask the other person to meet in a conference room to discuss the problem so that a solution can be proposed. If they cannot resolve their differences, you can arrange a joint session to talk through the problem. However, if a conflict involves unprofessional behavior, intervening first can work best: Pull the individuals aside at the start and discuss the details of the situation with resolution as the goal.

Occasionally, conflicts occur between members of your team and people in other groups. These conflicts often involve missed deliverables, but poor communication is usually at the core. Encourage the individuals to

talk about the issue first. Offer to assist if they cannot resolve the issue or if emotions are running high.

When assisting to resolve a difficult conflict, first speak with each person involved to understand both sides of the issue. Reconstruct the events in a timeline. Then call a review meeting with the participants and their managers, as appropriate. Present the factual events causing the conflict without making judgments. Ask the parties to consider what they can do differently to improve the situation the next time it occurs. Add your recommendations, if necessary.

ACTING TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

A project manager and her boss told me that they were unhappy with one of my engineers. The project was due live on the website at midnight, and work had stretched until after 5 PM. The manager told me that the engineer was supposed to have called when he completed his work. The engineer did not call, so the project manager called another engineer who completed the work just before midnight.

It turns out that the project manager gave the engineer a slip of paper with the person's phone number to call when the work was ready. Unfortunately, the engineer lost the number. Instead, he sent an email when the work was complete. The project manager did not look for the email and thought that the engineer had forgotten.

After talking through all the details of the project, I arranged a joint session with the individuals and the other manager. I stepped through the timeline factually and described the missteps. We discussed as a group how to avoid these issues going forward: For future after-hours work, the project manager would write a one-page plan. The plan would list who is doing what, how completed steps are communicated, and the participants' phone numbers. If a misstep occurred in the future, people agreed that they would call the managers that evening.

After the meeting, the participants indicated that they were pleased with the outcome.

—Web engineering manager

Don't ignore conflicts in the hope that they will go away, though they sometimes do. Instead, pay attention to conflicts, encourage people to resolve them directly, and intervene when necessary. In addition, instead of asking an aggrieved engineer if he would like mediation, coach that engineer on conflict resolution.

Training

Company-sponsored training indicates that the company cares enough about its employees to invest in their futures; most engineers will reciprocate with increased company loyalty. Training, of course, can also improve an engineer's performance, as she learns new approaches to technology, self-management, and work habits.

In general, engineers have based their careers on technical knowledge and respond positively to technical training. Technology changes so rapidly that much of the raw technical details in use today will become obsolete in a few years. Consequently, most engineers try to keep abreast of leading-edge technical knowledge, and this makes training an important aspect of work life. While technology training benefits engineers in the short term, general work skills training can have long-lasting positive effects on their careers. For example, learning time-management skills will make an engineer more productive regardless of what technology he is using. Most engineers will benefit from training on a variety of topics, such as the following:

Time management	Delegation
Project management	Management basics
Making presentations	Conflict resolution
Meeting management	Employee motivation
Systems analysis	Coaching
Negotiation	Interviewing
Marketing basics	Project budget management
Return on investment basics	Customer communication
Process improvement	Understanding emotional intelligence
Defining requirements	Understanding personality styles
Quality improvement	

Unfortunately, training in small companies is often limited by budget constraints. Since training trades short-term costs for long-term benefits, the costs can be difficult to justify when budgets are tight. In addition, many senior managers see little value in providing training to development engineers. This means training budgets are often the first things cut when the CEO tightens the purse strings.

Resist the temptation to ignore training when budgets are tight. Instead, consider various training alternatives such as the following:

- Offer to approve the expense of any reasonable book purchase.
- Select books on a topic and discuss them with the engineers; this can be an excellent way to provide inexpensive training.
- Ask one team member to share information about a topic with the team for an hour.
- Provide the training yourself by setting up a mini-course.
- Investigate online training options.
- Investigate small local training agencies that might be able to provide lower cost training than larger training houses.
- Investigate the possibility of large training firms providing classes to staff from multiple companies to lower the per-person cost.

Unfortunately, management often considers only the short-term costs of training, ignoring the costs of not providing training and the longer term benefits it can provide. Cutting even low-cost training is a strategic mistake for a small and growing company. Training improves employee stability and productivity, and small companies rely on employees and depend on low employee turnover to be successful.

Coaching

One of the most direct and satisfying ways to improve team performance is through individual coaching. Good coaching guides people toward self-improvement, which benefits the company as well as the individual.

CONTINUITY IN THE TRAINING ATTITUDE

When money was available for training at my company, I focused on making a list of training course opportunities and surveyed the development team to determine the highest interest items. I hired a local training company and we received excellent courses on time management, managing meetings, and project management.

The next year, budgets were tight, so the executive team eliminated training expenses. However, the need for training did not disappear. I purchased books on training topics for team members to read. I reviewed the books again and created a course outline, organizing the topic into a flow. After managers had read the books, I gave a two-hour training session on each topic, including a presentation plus a back-and-forth discussion following an outline I prepared.

I found that providing a training course was beneficial to me as a manager. The classes forced me to review the material and thereby refreshed my knowledge of the topics.

—Product development director

Successful coaching requires that the coach understands an individual's goals. Here are some good questions to ask as you coach a member of the development team:

- What motivates you?
- What are your long-term and short-term goals?
- What technologies interest you?
- What training would you like to have?
- What tasks do you enjoy doing most in your job?
- What do you like the least about your job?

Some people find it difficult to vocalize their career goals. As a result, a development engineer might look for a new job to advance her career instead of asking her current employers for more options. Convincing an engineer to stay when she has an employment offer from another company

LISTENING REQUIRES HAVING A CONVERSATION

Early in my career, an excellent engineer left my company because she wanted to do something else technically. Had I known, I could have arranged her work assignments to provide her with the technical challenge she was looking for.

She made the assumption that her current assignments were all that were available and that there was no point in asking for something different. She accepted an offer from another company. Although I told her I could change her work assignments, she did not want to go back on her word. By all indications, if I had known earlier and changed her assignments, she would have stayed.

—Engineering director

is difficult. It's far better to keep employees happy by coaching them and giving them the assignments they want, when possible.

Effective coaching requires a manager's time and an ability to listen. Coaching should be an important part of the weekly one-on-one meetings. You can coach individuals on how to improve their performance in a non-threatening way while encouraging them to improve.

Coaching is not simply cheerleading—it is aligning your team members with what they do best, providing extra training and practice for those who need improvement, and listening to concerns and determining how you can address them. In addition, coaching means pulling people aside and correcting them when they are approaching their tasks in the wrong way.

Motivating Your Team Members

Development teams are motivated in ways that differ from those of other teams—engineers generally do not respond well to “rah-rah” pep talks, emotional appeals, or contests. What motivates individual development

engineers varies, but they will usually tell you what they need if you ask them. These are some common motivations for engineers:

- Technical challenge
- Opportunity for career success and advancement
- Opportunity to participate in an outside organization, forum, or technology group
- Financial opportunity such as a stock award or raise
- Chance to go to conferences or seminars
- Flexible work schedule that allows them to schedule their own day and not have to arrive at 8 AM or be marked late
- Recognition from peers
- Recognition from respected managers
- Ability to take on senior-level tasks such as code reviews and new project estimates
- Opportunity to be part of a well-run team—an elite group of engineers paired with great management
- Opportunity to work on a flagship product
- Opportunity to work on a project that has applications in the “real world” outside the company

MOTIVATION THROUGH CHANGE

An engineer on my team was unhappy with his assignments. His performance was poor. He was argumentative and often late in delivery. He requested a transfer to another technical area. While my boss advised me to let him go, I gave him a shot at the technology he wanted. Over the next few months, the quality and timeliness of his work improved greatly. He was excited about learning and his attitude improved. The gamble of giving him a chance to do what he wanted paid off.

—Engineering manager

Engineers, like most workers, are usually at their best when they enjoy their work. Adding a little pressure to achieve reasonable goals will add to their overall success. If an engineer participates in establishing and committing to project content and delivery, he or she will feel motivated and enjoy the effort.

If engineers are encouraged and enjoy their work, many will want to put in extra effort. You can encourage them by determining what kind of work they enjoy most and create those assignment opportunities with realistic, attainable goals. Empower team members by involving them in estimating the work effort and delivery dates. Listen to and address your team's concerns. Ensure that the team has the proper tools to get the job done. Then watch them succeed.

In contrast, continually pushing people to commit to excessive overtime will lower team motivation and morale and can lead to people looking for new jobs. Engineers, like everyone else, need balance in their work and lives. You cannot build a high-trust environment or company loyalty if you expect employees to forego a balanced life.

Finally, acknowledge successes publicly. Your direct appreciation of a person's work builds up his or her motivation. You can express appreciation by talking directly to the person. Alternatively, you can show appreciation by personalizing a reward. Reward traditions vary considerably company by company, so consider these traditions when deciding on rewards. If your company does not have a reward tradition, start one. For example, you can set aside a budget to purchase small rewards to celebrate successes—time with a masseuse, extra vacation time, humorous plaques, a bonus or raise, gift cards, and coffee cards, for example.

Coaching Problem Employees

Every manager eventually encounters an employee who behaves inappropriately or who is difficult to work with—a “problem employee.” Perhaps you inherited this person from the manager who preceded you, he might be part of a reorganization, or you might have hired him. Even though small companies cannot afford employees who are not good workers, you can and should make a good faith effort to improve an employee's problem behaviors.

You might be tempted to delay dealing with a problem employee because you have so many important tasks to do. However, procrastination just allows more time for the problem to grow and affect other employees. Instead, as soon as a pattern of poor performance emerges, you should deal with the employee's problems.

Two categories of problems are common: employees who perform poorly and employees who disrupt the team with their poor attitude. A poorly performing employee will not deliver work on time or accurately communicate about his or her workload. An employee with a poor attitude has negative or condescending interactions with other employees or continually disparages the company. Like acid, this person will eventually corrode team cohesion and your ability to manage the team.

Start the correction process by talking to the employee about what you observe and try to determine the source of the issue. A number of reasons can exist for the employee's actions, including the following: The employee might need additional training but is afraid to ask; the employee might have a short-term personal problem and needs schedule flexibility to resolve it; the employee might need some coaching on how to be effective; or the employee might be unhappy with his or her work assignment.

Depending on the problem, you can work directly with the employee to offer coaching. However, if the employee insists that no problem exists or behavior explanations appear inadequate, he or she will probably not respond to your coaching. In such a case, you will need to move more rapidly to a formalized performance improvement plan.

When coaching an employee, start by agreeing on specific actions that would improve his or her work; this will provide goals and an impetus to improve. Then monitor progress and offer periodic progress reports. To keep coaching positive and not punitive, encourage the employee to perform well rather than only pointing out mistakes. If you describe what success looks like from your perspective and emphasize the importance of the worker's efforts to the company, he or she will be more likely to take the coaching as a positive opportunity.

If the employee's performance does not improve over the next month or you note a failure to make a reasonable effort to improve, you should consider additional measures, such as a formal improvement plan. The timing for when to formalize an improvement plan varies depending on

the situation. Put the employee “on notice” that his or her actions can lead to termination. Although some managers will fire the worker without a plan, you should create a plan to offer a fair opportunity for the employee to change and to provide some protection for your company from legal action.

Requirements for performance plans vary. Talk to your company’s human resources group to understand its requirements. A performance improvement plan should define specific problems, spell out the problem behavior as well as what success looks like, and describe the consequences of failure. In general, use no more than a 60-day review period for the plan.

Do not assume that performance plans automatically lead to dismissal. Although some employees will fail or will leave a company on their own, some will make an honest effort to improve and will succeed. Treat employees as though you expect them to succeed.

Reviews and Evaluations

Employee evaluations must be an ongoing effort throughout the year—don’t wait until the formal employee review to show appreciation for results or discuss a problem. In fact, an annual review is not the place to bring up problem behavior. Waiting for the annual review to offer an employee negative feedback is a poor but common management practice that usually stems from a manager’s desire not to confront the individual about a problem until forced to do so; this contributes to a low-trust environment, however. Though the annual review process usually forces the confrontation, most employees will feel blindsided if the first they hear of an issue is in their annual review. An annual review should reveal no surprises.

Companies handle annual reviews in a variety of ways. Many small companies offer no reviews, offer annual reviews for everyone at the same time, or offer annual reviews based on anniversary hire dates. From the company perspective, the review is driven by human resources (HR) to support corporate needs—perhaps to ensure that a review is on file to avoid potential lawsuits, especially if the person is terminated, or to reward people for good work so that they will stay.

Creating the Review

Do not wait until review time to collect information or offer feedback to team members. Instead, provide feedback all year during your one-on-one meetings. You should also collect data throughout the year by writing notes in a file about each employee's performance, rather than trying to remember this information at the end of the year. Having your notes at hand will make writing the review easier for you and more fair to the employee.

One popular practice is called the *360-degree review*. In this scenario, either HR or the manager collects information for the review from people working with the employee to be reviewed. People in other teams or co-workers can usually offer useful insight into the employee's performance. As part of the 360-degree review, you should also require a self-appraisal from the employee. Self-appraisals are great opportunities for employees to list their achievements for the year and judge their own performance. Often the self-appraisals will remind you of tasks the employee took on months ago that you had forgotten.

A punctual essay review is the best type of review because it covers multiple areas of performance. To write an essay review, start by collecting information. Ask the employee to complete his or her own version of the review and deliver it in advance of your meeting. If the company requires an employee self-appraisal, read it first. If self-appraisals are not required, you can still ask for them. Write your essay review with descriptions of the employee's successes and areas needing improvement. Keep the language straightforward and the text relatively short. On completion, review each sentence to make sure that it fits in the overall picture you want to provide for the employee.

A general format for the review covers results, successes, improvements, and a summary. At the beginning of the review, describe in detail the engineer's projects. The earlier notes and files for the year will make this task easy. Provide a short written discussion of each project, and describe the employee's performance and major efforts. Next, describe areas of strengths and weakness. Suggest techniques that might help him or her improve performance. Propose areas for which the employee would benefit from more training. You should also propose goals for the next year. Finally, provide a summary describing the employee's overall performance.

You might be required to fill out standard forms for the review. This does not preclude you from writing an essay and attaching it to the forms, however.

Delivering the Review

When you deliver the review, discuss each of the different areas reviewed. Avoid the temptation to hand the employee the written review at the start of the meeting, because he or she will quickly read it and not internalize what you are trying to say. Instead, spell out the major points and ask questions to determine whether the employee agrees or disagrees with your assessments. Give the employee time and encourage him or her to ask questions. When reasonable, make the review session a positive, uplifting discussion.

At the end of the meeting, provide a written copy of the review to the employee. You might consider scheduling a follow-up meeting for the day after the review if it seems appropriate. This gives the employee an opportunity to think about the review and convey any thoughts the next day.

Providing Late and Deficient Reviews

Reviews are important to employees for career and financial reasons. Providing regularly scheduled reviews on time is a sign of respect. A late review can be demoralizing for an employee who is asked to wait. Providing late reviews add to employee anxiety and can make the employee believe he or she is neither important nor respected.

The anxiety level is often greater if the review is tied to an annual salary increase. A few companies have the abominable practice of not backdating raises if the manager delivers the review late. In these companies, a manager's delay leads to lost income for the employee, so the review is no longer a positive experience; it has turned into a negative experience that increases the employee's cynicism and destroys his or her trust in the company.

Delayed reviews can cause other problems, as well. Development engineers will let others know of their concerns about the company and management. They might assume management is delaying the reviews so the company can save money and may thus speculate that the company is in financial trouble.

So why do managers deliver late reviews? For most managers, writing a review is a painful process that they avoid by indefinitely delaying the task, not writing anything, or not offering advice during the reviews. Many managers ignore the importance of the review to ongoing employee goodwill.

Poorly written reviews also have a negative impact on employees. Such a review might list only a few bullet points along with the HR-mandated evaluation boxes in a few different categories. The only review worse than a poorly written review is one that the manager did not write at all. If HR requires a review session but nothing else, the review can become a *handshake annual review*, in which the manager offers the employee a few verbal comments along with a raise figure and a handshake.

THE HANDSHAKE ANNUAL REVIEW

I have received a half-dozen handshake annual reviews in my career. I usually find them disappointing, as they offer no guidance for the future. They also indicate that my manager does not want to spend the time thinking about how I really did. The reviews were all positive, so I would have liked a written record. The record is valuable to me, especially when I have a new manager.

My favorite reviews are upbeat discussions with details and ideas for improvement that I can actually act on.

—Engineer

HR departments can make it easy for managers to write poor reviews in several ways. First, the review form can use rating checkboxes that allow a manager to assign a numerical value to each area. In some companies, the sum or average of the numbers on the form constitutes the employee's rating. This approach falsely assumes that all the rating items have equivalent value and will lead to skewed employee evaluations.

Some forms have limited space for including information about an employee's key attributes. Advising an employee is difficult when you are limited to two lines of comments. A reasonable review requires full descriptions.

A minimum standard for quality of the review or feedback is often missing. If a manager can produce an acceptable review by checking boxes and writing “Good work,” the standard is too low. A form review can be easy, but it does not serve the company or the employees.

Reviews should be a ceremonial culmination of continuous feedback and coaching. Annual reviews are easy to write by drawing from the outputs of a yearlong coaching system. Employees spend a year of their lives developing software for your company. Condensing a person’s effort into a short summary of “Good work” and a checklist is

Unacceptable Acceptable

on the part of the manager. Instead, use the review to reinforce the coaching you provided throughout the year.

Additional Reading

Here is some additional reading on topics presented in this chapter:

1001 Ways to Reward Employees, by Bob Nelson (Workman Publishing Company, 2005)

Becoming a Coaching Leader: The Proven Strategy for Building Your Own Team of Champions, by Daniel S. Harkavy (Thomas Nelson, 2007)

Love 'em or Lose 'em, by Beverley Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans (Berrett-Koehler Publishing, 1999)

Managing Software Maniacs: Finding, Managing, and Rewarding a Winning Development Team, by Ken Whitaker (Wiley, 1994)

Managing Technical People: Innovation, Teamwork, and the Software Process, by Watts S. Humphrey (Addison-Wesley Professional, 1996)

Peopleware: Productive Projects and Teams, by Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister (Dorsett House Publishing Company, 1999)

Slack: Getting Past Burnout, Busywork, and the Myth of Total Efficiency, by Tom DeMarco (Broadway, 2002)

What Every Manager Should Know About Training: An Insider’s Guide to Getting Your Money’s Worth from Training, by Robert F. Mager (CEP Press, 1999)