SET for Success: Leading with Simplicity, Engagement, and Trust

By Jerry Manas, PMP

I call it the tale of two paradigms. On one hand, there are the process control pundits that say, "Process is everything." "If only we had the right process," they say, "then it wouldn't matter what kind of people we had." Or, "If only everyone followed our process, then things would be better."

Then there are those at the opposite end of the spectrum. "Process schmocess," they say. "All we need to do is give people the right objectives, and get out of their way. They'll know what to do."

There are dangers lurking in both extremes of thinking. First, let's say everyone *did* follow a rigorous process (which is unlikely to begin with, given the variability of human nature). What then? What if reality gets in the way and renders the process irrelevant—or worse… incorrect? What if people followed the process to the letter and some of your best people became apathetic because they felt that their creativity was stifled?

Let's look at the other extreme, where people are left to their own devices to meet a defined objective. If we don't provide the right systems, tools, and training, or we assume they're on board with our ideals just because we announced them; we are setting our people up for failure (this problem is frequently seen with the traditional *Management by Objectives* approach). There is a fine line between freedom and neglect.

These are all very real dangers, and unfortunately they happen every day. The way to reconcile these schools of thought is through three cornerstones of good leadership: *Simplicity*, *Engagement* and *Trust (which we can remember with the acronym SET)*.

The Simple Life

Management's instinct when trying to improve the way things are done is to work every detail out on paper, and then get people to conform. While it's useful to analyze processes and figure out what's working and what's not, to prescribe every detail is an exercise in futility. Instead, we need a handful of guiding principles, clear and simple objectives, and a high level framework to foster the correct mindset. How people accomplish things should not be prescribed, except for cases where safety is involved or exact specifications must be met. For any form or report, we must ask, "Is this needed? Why? Who will read it and use it? How will they use it? Is there an easier way to accomplish the same thing? Would a checklist be more appropriate than a form?" In many cases, we can simplify our lives and eliminate extra steps. In addition, many of these tools can be moved to a "toolbox," which people can use as needed, depending on the situation.

If we spent more time *helping* people by making sure they had the right systems, tools, and training, and less time *measuring* them and *monitoring* them, we'd achieve

results quicker. And isn't results what we're after? As the saying goes, "Nobody ever grew taller by being measured."

What about the need for standardization? Even Peter Scholtes, renowned guru of quality, systems, and process, cautions us on the overuse of standardization. Scholtes writes and consults frequently on the importance of quality standards. Yet, he offers:

> *There is a delicate line to walk when dealing with standardization. On the one hand, we want methods of work that are usefully constraining, that eliminate needless variation in method, and, therefore, in output… While we want to eliminate art-form-like caprice and needless variation from work, we do not want to make work oppressively rigid and obnoxiously bureaucratic. Between these is the fine line. By involving people in the standardization of work, we can remove some of the oppressiveness of it. People are less likely to balk at standards they have devised. Recognizing that we need not standardize everything should help. Also, agreeing to begin with those processes that we all acknowledge need standardization should help. The ideal is for people to take charge of their own standardization effort.*

In other words, not everything need be standardized. If we get everyone to agree on the few items that need standardization the most, we can begin there, and adjust accordingly. After all, this is an art, not a science. The key thing is to engage people in the process rather than announce "the new rules." This takes us to our second cornerstone: engagement.

The Art of Engagement

Shared ideals is a key element of organizational success. And the road to shared ideals is paved with engagement. By engaging people in solving problems and/or addressing opportunities, we are tapping into their primordial need to help. I once had a client who could not get his people to execute his business case form correctly. "They just don't understand," he said. "I've been doing this my whole career and have expertise in this area. They seem to resent that I'm asking them to provide this information."

I advised, just as I often advise to clients, that he instead engage them in the process. I asked him to list the key objectives the document is mean to achieve, and for which audiences. The next step, I suggested, would be to schedule a session with his people where the group could collectively create a document (possibly referencing the current form) and agree on which items were needed, why they were needed, and what the simplest ways were to accomplish the objectives. "But they're not as qualified," he responded. I clarified that qualification is irrelevant. If people are expected to contribute at a high level, they will live up to those expectations. People will live up—or down—to the image we bestow upon them.

I asked him to make a point to listen to what they were saying, not to bully them into conformity. If they disagreed with the need for something, I asked him to pose probing questions, such as, "How would you suggest we avoid "xyz" or accomplish "abc?" In the end, they agreed on document everyone could live with. More importantly, his people said it was the first time they felt listened to and engaged in the process.

Through engagement, the *relationships* improved, which is another vital element of success.

A Matter of Trust

When we speak of simplicity and engagement, many managers get concerned. "How can we trust that our people will do the right thing?" they ask. Yet, trust is essential if we are to ever be scalable and grow other effective leaders. And so, is it our third cornerstone of good leadership. Trust, tempered with situational coaching, can work wonders toward long-term organizational excellence.

If we communicate clear objectives and outcomes, provide the right support, and build shared ideals through engagement, there is no reason we shouldn't be able to trust our people. Will there be abusers? Maybe. But a few bad apples shouldn't make us treat the whole bunch as spoiled.

Best Buy has achieved amazing increases in productivity and employee retention with their Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), a model built on trust. People can work wherever and however they choose, as long as they deliver results. And unlike *Management by Objectives*, people are not left to the wolves and then judged on elements that are out of their control. They are supported with means before they are judged on the ends. Ricardo Semler has achieved equally remarkable feats with his Semco organization (written about in his book, *Maverick*). His whole organizational model is built on trust, with flexible work schedules, no performance evaluations, an honor system for travel expenses, and so on. Yet, his profits have been steadily increasing for over 20 years.

Best Buy and Semco have embraced the concept of trust. According to a recent CIO Magazine article, so have McGraw-Hill, Cisco, and Deloitte, organizations which are also experimenting with flexible work schedules and achieving similar results.

What's surprising is that organizations are concerned about vigilance over their employees, and less so about vigilance over their leaders. If vigilance is needed, it is in ensuring our leaders create the right environment for success: an environment rooted in simplicity, engagement, and trust. Then we'll be SET for success!

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