The Fundamentals Are All You Need

You walk into your weekly team meeting expecting the standard updates around the table. Some people are more prepared than others. Not enough information from some, too much from others. Digressions. Side conversations. Devices. One hour turns into two.

You sometimes think: "Why do we even have these team meetings?" After all, everyone touches base with everybody on the team almost daily. There is an open door policy. If something comes up, you let each other know as needed. You talk and email with each other all day long.

Nonetheless, the meeting begins as usual. Until it quickly surfaces that very important Project Q is off track and behind schedule. How could this be? You've been checking in with everybody regularly, one-on-one, on top of the weekly team meeting.

It's not clear what happened. Maybe there was a change in specifications that wasn't fully communicated. Perhaps a resource constraint got in the way, a technology glitch, or human error? Somebody must have dropped the ball—internally or externally. Is there anyone who can be held accountable? Mr. Red has dropped the ball before.

There are a lot of moving parts with Project Q. Now changes must be made throughout, changes that will require rework by counterparts in another group in another department. They will not be happy.

Time, resources, energy, and money have been wasted. There is blaming, complaining, explaining. Everything has been harder since the team recently lost its most valuable player, Ms. Platinum. And her replacement, Ms. Bronze, is still not fully up to speed.

You spring into action, and the firefighting ensues. You have a series of one-on-one huddles with the team members you know you can count on in a jam. You take over some responsibilities yourself—including begging the counterparts in the other groups in the other departments to redo their parts. There are some quick stand-up meetings and long hours of heavy lifting. The crisis is handled, and Project Q is back on track.

When you figure out exactly what happened, there will probably be some very difficult conversations, and there will be consequences. Some people might lose their jobs. Even if Mr. Red is not to blame, it's about time you really spoke to Mr. Red about his stubbornly inconsistent performance.

Once you finally get everything back on track, you are way behind on your other responsibilities. So are your employees. But things are mostly back to normal.

You touch base with everybody almost daily. They know your door is always open. If something comes up, you let each other know as needed. You talk and email with each other all day long. In any event, you will catch up with everyone in the next team meeting.

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Any manager will tell you: firefighting is part of the job. It's very hard to break the cycle, because when there is an urgent problem, it simply must be addressed. Things do go wrong—fires occur. If you are the manager, you are in charge. You lead the fight. Everybody has to grab a bucket and help fight the fire. But it's usually difficult, time-consuming work. By the time you are done, you are way behind on all of the other work you were supposed to be doing.

Many managers have asked themselves this question: How do I make any real progress when there are so many fires to put out?

The question you should be asking is this: How many of the most frequently occurring "fires" can be prevented altogether or largely avoided, or have their impact substantially mitigated? In advance? Way in advance? And every step of the way?

The answer is most of them.

How? By consistently practicing the fundamentals, very well. That means maintaining an ongoing schedule of high-quality one-on-one dialogues with every single person you manage. High-quality means highly structured and highly substantive: ongoing, regular, scheduled, frequent, with a clear execution focus, specific to the individual, and two-way conversation. These are not the so-called "crucial conversations" when things go wrong, but regular check-ins when everything is going great, or not so great, or even just average. This insight is based on twenty years of in-depth research on supervisory relationships in the workplace. What's amazing is that so few managers in the real world consistently practice the fundamentals very well. What's even more amazing is that so many managers think they are already doing it, when they are not.

Look at the manager of Project Q, just described. At first glance, he appears to be attending reasonably well to the fundamentals of management 101: Holding regular team meetings, touching base with his employees almost daily, open door policy, and ongoing visibility by email and telephone.

That's what makes this problem so complicated: the manager is following the right steps—going through the right motions. What else could he be doing? And if you had asked him just before Project Q fell apart, he probably would have said, "Everything is going just fine."

The manager in this story is like the vast majority of managers at all levels in organizations of all shapes and sizes. This manager is communicating with his direct reports plenty. Just not very well. Not only that, because he is communicating plenty, he is lulled into a false sense of security.

In fact, if this manager is like the vast majority, it is quite likely that the manager's communication is mostly ad hoc, hit or miss, surface level, and often pro forma. I call this "managing on autopilot."

The vast majority of managers do their "managing" more or less on autopilot until something goes wrong—and something always does. Then communication becomes more heated and urgent—sometimes even more accurate and effective. Managers almost always get most thoroughly involved when there are problems to address—large, medium, or small—what I've been referring to here as "firefighting."

Most managers think, "Everything is going just fine. It's just that we have a lot of fires to put out, and that makes it very hard to get into a good routine. Whenever you get into a good routine, pretty soon there is another fire." What they don't realize is that they are stuck in a vicious cycle:

> Managing on autopilot → False sense of security → Small problems have time to fester and grow → Problems inevitably blow up → Manager (and others) pulled into firefighting mode → Things get "back to normal," managing on autopilot.

How do you break the cycle?

In nearly every one of the thousands of cases I've studied, the solution is simple. Not easy. But simple. What's missing is almost always the fundamentals.

At RainmakerThinking, our research shows that very few (roughly one out of ten) managers are acing it. Too many are failing. The vast majority go through the motions, but not very well. This is what I call "undermanagement."

I've written extensively on the "undermanagement epidemic"—the widespread failure of leaders, managers, and supervisors to consistently practice Management 101 with excellence. For years, my focus has been on figuring out why. Why don't managers consistently practice the fundamentals with excellence?

Here's the thing: Most managers are trying. Most managers communicate plenty. And on the surface it often looks like they are

practicing the fundamentals of Management 101. But in the vast majority of cases their management communication is severely lacking in both structure and substance. So the motions they are going through don't accomplish very much. And they don't realize it.

Practicing Management 101—just the fundamentals—requires discipline and rigor. It's not easy to maintain a high-structure, high-substance, ongoing one-on-one dialogue with every person you manage. Nonetheless, those are the fundamentals. If you are not doing that, how can you say in any meaningful way that you are "managing" someone?

If you are somebody's manager, then you have power over that person's livelihood and career, their ability to add value, and their ability to earn—this is how people put food on their table. They are working to make a living and take care of themselves and their families. And you are that person's boss. That is a profound responsibility. The least you can do is the fundamentals.

If the fundamentals are not working for you, then it is almost surely the case that you are not doing them right. The fundamentals are all you need. It's just that Management 101 is a more complex and difficult art than most people realize.

The Undermanagement Epidemic: Revisited

I've been conducting in-depth workplace research since 1993. Back then I was a frustrated young lawyer investigating the work attitudes of Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1977). That led to my first book, *Managing Generation X*, and quickly morphed into a career doing custom workplace research, consulting, and management training. From then on I've had a front-row seat from which to study workplace dynamics. I've spent most of my time interviewing, advising, and training managers at all levels: tens of thousands of managers, from CEOs to frontline supervisors, in just about every industry—retail, health care, research, finance, aerospace, software, manufacturing, the public sector, even nonprofits, you name it.

My company, RainmakerThinking, has been dedicated, since its founding, to conducting in-depth workplace research (ongoing surveys, questionnaires, strategic polls, focus groups, interviews, and literature review) to support this work. Over the years, our research has continually taken us back to the undermanagement epidemic.

Why?

Because undermanagement is almost always there, hiding in plain sight. It is so often what's going wrong in so many workplaces. It is rampant. It is costly. It is very easy to treat, but it is very hard to cure. The medicine is strong, so when you feel better, it's tempting to water it down. But as soon as you stop taking the strong medicine, you start to get sick again.

Our ongoing research shows that undermanagement is a perennial issue: The remarkably consistent data shows that nine out of ten managers fail to maintain an ongoing one-on-one dialogue sufficient to deliver on the "the fundamentals."

The costs and lost opportunities caused by undermanagement are incalculably high. How many tasks, responsibilities, and projects do managers do that could or should be delegated to someone else? If only the manager were managing closely enough to delegate properly. How many high performers leave their jobs because they don't have a good working relationship with their manager? How many low performers are hiding out, collecting a paycheck, because their manager is not keeping track? How many people would do more work or better work if they had more support, guidance, and direction from their manager? How many problems could be prevented or largely avoided or at least mitigated?

The solution: get managers to recognize that they are undermanaging and start practicing Management 101.

What has been thrilling to me (and our clients) has been the tremendous positive impact of back-to-fundamentals management. I've watched how just getting back to the fundamentals—learning and practicing the surprisingly complex art of Management 101—has dramatically improved the effectiveness—and the bottom-line results—of

leaders and managers at all levels in organizations of all shapes and sizes. In the last two decades, I've taught the Surprisingly Difficult Art of Management 101 to hundreds of thousands of leaders and managers and supervisors. But not just to new managers or middle managers. I've also taught the same material to thousands of CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, COOs, four star Generals, other senior executives, even a few heads of state.

You never get so good (at anything) that you don't need to practice the fundamentals.

We've asked tens of thousands of nonmanagers over the last twenty years, "What is the one improvement you'd like to make in your relationship with your manager that would help you do your job better?" We ask this as an open-ended question. There are no multiple-choice options. Overwhelmingly, the most common response (from more than 60 percent of people)—far and away the number-one common denominator in responses, year after year—has been "communication." Usually "more communication" and/or "better communication."

We've asked tens of thousands of managers a similar question: "What is the one improvement you'd like to make in your relationships with your direct reports?" Again, the response is overwhelmingly (from more than 60 percent) "communication"—usually "more" and/or "better."

I always marvel at this, because in most workplaces there is an awful lot of communication. In most workplaces nowadays there are way too many emails, mediocre meetings, and lots of touching base, checking in, catching up, and just plain shooting the breeze. There's lots of communication in today's workplace. It's just mostly low-structure and low-substance. And so it's not accomplishing very much. That's why people crave "more" and "better" communication.

Here's the good news: The fundamentals work. The simple process of maintaining high-structure, high-substance, ongoing one-on-one dialogues really works wonders. When managers consistently practice this technique, employees get the guidance, direction, feedback, troubleshooting, and coaching they need. And the business results follow: increased employee performance and morale, increased retention of

high performers, a necessary and welcome increase in turnover among low performers, and significant measurable improvements in business-outcomes. Not only that, but a steadily diminishing rate of management time spent "firefighting."

Here's the catch: It's not easy.

The first big hurdle for a manager who wants to get back to fundamentals and start practicing Management 101 is making the transition. Going from *not* maintaining high-structure, high-substance, ongoing one-on-one dialogues with every direct report to making them a regular practice is a big change. The manager needs to prepare for that change personally and professionally, then communicate this to colleagues and superiors, roll it out to direct reports, and then start doing it.

That's the second big hurdle: It's time-consuming, especially at first. Getting back to fundamentals usually requires a big up-front investment of extra time. If you haven't been doing it before, you will still have to fight all the fires you have not prevented at the same time you are investing time heavily in preventing future fires. You have to do double time for a while, until all the old fires die out. That's when you start getting your time back. But it takes a while. So you have to stick with it.

And that's the third big hurdle: Staying ahead of the cycle. In our research, managers tell us the biggest obstacle to consistently practicing the management fundamentals is that they simply don't have enough time. They have multiple competing priorities. There is always something more urgent than making sure to have those structured one-on-ones with their direct reports. Plus, there are so many meetings. On the other hand, managers say, they typically catch up with their direct reports in some of these meetings anyway, and they regularly touch base, check in, and are communicating throughout the day by phone and email and text. Not to mention, once in a while there is a true emergency—maybe an unavoidable emergency—that sucks everybody in and leaves everybody behind on everything. Then you really *don't* have time.

I've spent so much time behind the scenes in so many organizations that I can tell you this much: The managers who are most convinced

that they don't have time to manage properly spend more time managing than any other managers. That is almost always the case.

The real problem is how they are spending their management time. These are nearly always the managers who spend an inordinate percentage of their management time "firefighting"—often solving problems that never had to happen in the first place or could have been identified and solved more easily at an earlier point. These are also nearly always the managers who spend surprisingly large amounts of time communicating with their direct reports in relatively low-structure, low-substance conversations, punctuated by way too many mediocre meetings.

Here's the really good news: When managers put their management time where it belongs—up front, every step of the way, before anything goes right, wrong, or average—the rigor and discipline does pay off. When managers consistently maintain the high-structure, high-substance, ongoing one-on-one dialogues, everything goes better. They get their time back.

Still, the hardest thing of all for most managers to do is really stick close to the fundamentals even when the heat is on. Our research shows that even the best managers are most likely to be thrown off their game by an acute crisis—even a relatively small one. Of course, nowadays you are always managing under pressure.

Why Managing People Is Hard

It's always been hard to manage people. It is much harder today than ever before, and it's getting harder every day.

Why?

Let's start with globalization and technology. The pace of change is accelerating for everyone all the time—from the macro level all the way down to the micro. In today's knowledge-driven, machine-powered, highly interconnected, fiercely competitive global marketplace, everything is complex, fast-moving, and always in flux. Work that used to take weeks must be done in moments. Relationships that

would have been nearly impossible due to geography are now taken for granted. Communication and travel are nearly instantaneous.

Yet we are also vulnerable in entirely new ways. One technical glitch today can slow down (or shut down) your operation for days or weeks at a time—not just in your own machines, but in machines who-knows-where with which you had no idea you had any connection whatsoever. An earthquake on the other side of the world today— actual or metaphorical—could affect you today in ways you probably cannot even imagine, including ways that didn't exist yesterday. Not to mention your customers, vendors, contractors, partners, colleagues, and counterparts in other departments and workgroups.

Everybody is under more pressure. The corporate order of the day is to run ever more lean and flexible. Squeeze more and more productivity and quality out of tightly controlled resources. Chase innovation and technology to keep from falling behind. Manage talent as a capital (depreciating) asset, in the wake of a profound transformation in the fundamental employer-employee relationship. After decades of constant downsizing, restructuring, and reengineering, nobody expects to pay their dues and climb the corporate ladder anymore.

Job security has been dead for some time now. The default presumption of long-term hierarchical employment relationships has been replaced by a new presumptive career path built on a growing portfolio of short-term transactional employment relationships of varying scope and duration.

Never forget that most employees work because they must. They work to support themselves and their families. Most are pursuing some kind of intermediate and longer-term security, but today that plan is rarely contingent on a long-term relationship with one particular employer. Very few employees now look at one employer as a primary source of their long-term career security, much less their long-term economic security.

The problem is that the promise (implied or even explicit) of long-term vesting rewards from employers is no longer enough to get

employees to perform today. Employees are less willing to follow orders, work harder, and contribute their best today in exchange for vague promises about what they might get in five years or ten years. Who knows where they'll be in five or ten years?! There is simply too much uncertainty.

Employees today want to know, "What do you want from me today, tomorrow, this week, this month, this year? And what do you have to offer me in return today, tomorrow, this week, this month, this year?"

Managers today are always in danger of losing good people. People come and go. People move around internally. These factors militate against continuity in working relationships. Sometimes those who are least likely to leave are the hardest to manage. Everybody is a special case.

Managing people has become an ongoing (sometimes daily) negotiation. That is high maintenance!

At the same time, most managers, like most everybody else, are being asked to do more with less. They have more of their own non-management tasks and responsibilities, increased administrative burdens and growing managerial spans of control, often including employees working in different locations or on different schedules, as well as depending more and more on people in other workgroups and departments. With so much resource and process streamlining, there is growing interdependency in almost everybody's work. Everything we do now involves a lot of moving parts. We depend on so many other people, all the time.

Meanwhile, as always, everybody involved is human. People have feelings. That's a significant consideration for everybody involved.

There are so many factors beyond any one manager's control. Maybe it feels like our problems have outgrown the fundamentals. Our situation is too complex. Our challenges are too advanced. Most managers simply convince themselves that the fundamentals are simply no longer enough, or they just don't have time.

How Most Managers Spend Most
of Their Management Time

Let's go back to the manager of Project Q at the beginning of this chapter. If you interviewed a manager like this one privately (as I do all the time in my research), asking him how he had managed the project, he would say something like this:

> Listen, I already spend tons of time communicating with my direct reports, not to mention my various bosses, and counterparts in other workgroups and other departments. Look at Project Q. I was holding regular team meetings. On top of the multitude of other meetings I must attend on and off all day long, every day. I touch base with everybody every day. I have an open door policy. If anything comes up, we let each other know as needed. Plus we talk and email with each other all day long. Until everything fell apart, everything was going just fine.

Indeed, this is what managers tell us in our interviews and seminars, with striking consistency. Most managers spend the vast majority of their management time on four pernicious time drains:

#1. Attending Too Many Mediocre Group Meetings

Group meetings, team meetings, cross-functional teams, special projects, committees. Meetings are the number one time suck for managers. Ask any manager.

Most of us work in highly interdependent workplaces where we all must rely on each other on complex projects with lots of moving pieces. With more and more people working interdependently, there are more and more meetings.

At its best, a meeting is great for:

- Communicating in-person information that everybody needs to know
- When multiple people need to discuss and solve a problem together
- Shared experience to build cohesion, commitment, and motivation

But so many meetings are not very good at all. Too many people attend too many meetings in which they neither add value nor take anything valuable away. Five people in a room for an hour—that's five hours of productive capacity in that room. You better make those meetings good.

Meetings are also not very good for creating real accountability. It's too easy to hide in a team meeting. It's even easier to point fingers and divert attention.

#2. Wading Through a Never-Ending Tidal Wave of Email

Electronic communication is at everybody's fingertips all the time. Your inbox pulls you in and demands you reply. It's so hard to resist.

At its best, email is great for:

- Communicating remotely information that everybody needs to know
- Documenting verbal communication
- Maintaining asynchronous conversations in between scheduled conversations

But so much of email is unnecessary, duplicative, and/or sloppy. The most pernicious thing about all that email is that mixed in with all the bad email is important information, and we want to assume that, because we sent it, the recipient has read and understood it. Even worse than a message never sent is a message sent but never received.

#3. Touching Base, Checking In, and Shooting the Breeze

"How are you?" "How's everything going?" "Is everything on track?" "Are there any problems I should know about?"

These are the questions managers most commonly ask their direct reports, yet they tell you so little about what's really going on. They are gestures, mostly. You might as well say, "Tell me you are fine." "Tell

me everything is going fine." "Tell me everything is on track." "Tell me there are no problems I should know about."

The worst thing about management by "touching base" is that it makes you feel like you are staying on top of things, but it takes a lot more than rhetorical questions to really stay on top.

The right questions are: "What did you do? How did you do it? What steps did you take? What step are you on right now? Let me see what you've got so far. What are you going to do next? How are you going to do it? What steps are you going to follow? How long will each step take?" Questions like that can't be asked and answered in a meaningful way if the conversation happens just in passing.

#4. Interrupting and Being Interrupted

Something pops into your head, you interrupt them. Something pops into their head, they interrupt you. "Do you have a minute?"

When you are interrupted, you are not at your best. Most likely you were in the middle of something. You have to break your attention. Pull yourself out of whatever it is you were doing. Try to focus. But you are not prepared. And what you really want is to get back to whatever it is you were doing before you were interrupted. Your responses to your direct reports (and anyone else) when you are interrupted are never going to be as thorough and accurate as they would be if you had time to prepare.

The same is true for your direct reports and other colleagues when you interrupt them.

Formal Reviews Are Not Enough

Beyond these four common time drains, most managers also are required to spend a certain amount of time and energy on periodic formal reviews. Depending on the organization, it may be a yearly ritual or it may be much more often. In any event, these formal reviews often take up a lot of time and attention.

What often passes for structured or substantive management communication—sometimes the only such communication—are the performance reviews that managers are required by most organizations to have with their direct reports annually or every six months or every quarter. Three, six, and twelve month reviews have long been notorious for their lack of efficacy. Employees have told us for years in our interviews that formal reviews rarely give them meaningful, helpful feedback:

"They do it just because they have to."

"Sometimes they don't even do it."

"They do it late or last minute."

"Some managers just ask the employees to write their own reviews."

"It's all politics, who they like."

"Reviews are too vague."

"Reviews are too specific, mentioning something that happened months and months ago."

"My review was done by someone who doesn't even manage me day to day."

"My review focused on things I can't control like overall numbers that are not just affected by my performance."

And so on.

In general, formal reviews tend to fall somewhere on the spectrum between two extremes. On one end they focus on highly subjective feedback but without the benefit of regular, ongoing, day-to-day feedback along the way. This sort of review tends to be idiosyncratic and incidental, reflecting what a manager has observed, if there is a big win or if there is a notable problem.

More and more common is the other end of the spectrum, in which reviews increasingly rely on the elements of employee performance that are tracked (more or less) automatically—bottom-line numbers

that appear in weekly or monthly reports. Managers at all levels today are given performance objectives (usually articulated in numbers) for every dimension of their operations. The very worthy intention is to place the focus on concrete, measurable outcomes. The problem is that usually the numbers serve as a trigger for cascading recrimination (or praise), even though what gets measured is often not tied directly to actions in the control of individual employees. Meanwhile, most leading organizations are moving to some form of "forced ranking." This is the practice whereby managers are required to make candid evaluations of every employee according to a tightly proscribed distribution of grades such as A, B, and C. Sadly, although evaluation and differentiation are key, this is an exercise in annual guesswork unless managers are monitoring, measuring, and documenting every employee's performance on an ongoing basis. Once, twice, or four times a year doesn't do the trick. When the manager does not monitor and measure and document each employee's actual performance (concrete actions within his or her control) on an ongoing basis, ranking—and the differential rewards that go with ranking—often are not clearly enough connected to the performance of each individual in question. So the system is perceived as capricious and unfair. Over and over again, I have seen forced-ranking and pay-for-performance initiatives result in disastrous morale because managers failed to do the necessary work.

The Inevitable Challenges Every Manager Must Face with Surprising Regularity

If you were still interviewing the manager of Project Q, this time asking him to do a postmortem on exactly what went wrong, if he is like most of the managers we've studied, he'd probably say something like this:

> As usual, the problems that occurred were due to a bunch of factors beyond my control. We lost our best employee, and her replacement was not yet up to speed. Resources are tight. There were changes in the project specifications that came from

someone else somewhere else—maybe a customer or a vendor or a counterpart in another group in another department. That change was not fully communicated to the right people. There were a lot of moving pieces. And somebody dropped the ball. We are understaffed. Or wrongly staffed. Some people refuse to pull their weight.

I'm doing the best I can under the circumstances. Things were going just fine. Until everything fell apart. All due to factors beyond my control.

Managers tell us this every day. Most of the firefighting (not to mention all the false alarms) seems unavoidable, yet our research shows that the most frequently occurring problems come up over and over again. The overwhelming majority of the seemingly inevitable problems that vex managers almost always flow from these factors:

- **Personnel discontinuity**. People come and go. That's always been true. But employment relationships today are far more short-term and fluid than they have been before in the modern economy. So you are always losing good people. And you are always trying to get new people on board and up to speed. On top of that, one great employee is worth more than three or four or five mediocre employees. Sometimes you have to go to great lengths to effectively reward, retain, and develop the very best employees.

- **Constant change coming at you from every direction**. Technology. The markets. The weather. Geopolitics. Micropolitics. Customer requirements; vendor requirements; employee requirements. Change regularly forces rework, often involving lots of moving parts, and therefore lots of counterparts here, there, and everywhere.

- **Interdependency**. Again, more and more of our work involves lots of moving parts and therefore lots of counterparts here, there, and everywhere. Most people must rely on many others within and outside of their immediate work group in order to do their own work.

- **Resource constraints**. Nowadays everybody is expected to do more with less. Increasingly, people report that they are making do with tighter resources and longer and more complex supply lines with shorter lead times. Often people find themselves trying to do their jobs with what they feel are insufficient resources.

- **Employees being human**. Human beings have weaknesses as well as strengths. Humans are not always great at self-management. They have habits, and not always good ones. Not only that, but everybody has bad days. Some people have bad weeks, months, and years. Productivity and quality of work are highly variable, sometimes due to employee performance. On top of all that, humans have attitudes, and not always good ones.

So what's a manager to do? What do the very best managers do?

For many years, in the research we conduct before, during, and after our management seminars, we have studied what the very best managers actually do that is different from the others. I'm talking about the very best managers: managers whose employees consistently deliver the highest productivity and quality, with high retention of high performers and high turnover among low performers, with the best business outcomes and high morale and team spirit, whose direct reports are most likely to describe the manager as "one of the best managers I've ever had." What is the common denominator among those managers? An abiding commitment to the fundamentals—relentless high-quality communication. Consistently engaging every direct report in an ongoing, highly structured, content-rich one-on-one dialogue about the work that needs to be done by that person. Things go much better when managers consistently make expectations clear and provide candid feedback for every individual every step of the way. Use team meetings only for what team meetings are good for—and make the most of them.

When managers build and maintain high-quality one-on-one dialogues with their direct reports, they almost always increase employee performance and morale, increase retention of high performers and

turnover among low performers, and achieve significant measurable improvements in business outcomes.

Here's the really good news: They spend less and less time firefighting. They get ahead of the problems and prevent the fires. They break the vicious cycle. They start getting their management time back. Then, if they don't slip up on the fundamentals, a virtuous upward spiral begins to build.

How do you break free from the vicious cycle? Those regular one-on-ones are your fire prevention, preparation, and training. That's where real impact occurs. Not in the crucial conversations, but rather in the routine conversations. First you need to make those routine conversations much, much better.

How to Make Those Routine Conversations Much, Much Better: High Structure, High Substance

As a manager, do you want to stop agonizing? Do you want to stop struggling? Do you want to sidestep one crisis after another? Do you want to get the most out of your people? Do you want to quickly master the seemingly most difficult management relationships?

I teach managers to do what the very best managers do: Build and maintain an ongoing, regular one-on-one dialogue with every person you manage in order to:

- Make expectations clear
- Track performance and provide ongoing candid feedback
- Provide support, direction, troubleshooting, and guidance
- Make accountability a process, not a slogan
- Recognize and reward in line with performance

That's it. Highly structured, highly substantive one-on-one dialogue. Of course, there is much nuance in the details.

What Is High Structure?

High structure means regularly scheduled and conducted according to a clear, well-organized agenda. That doesn't mean it should be a one-way conversation. Of course, you need to allow for give and take.

The first person you need to manage every day is yourself. You need to set aside the time every day to manage. I recommend a minimum of an hour a day; think of it as like taking a walk every day. Make that your sacrosanct time for managing. During that hour, do not fight fires. Use that hour for managing up front, before anything goes right, wrong, or average.

The second person you need to manage every day is everybody else. In an ideal world, you would talk with every single direct report every single day. You would take that management walk every day with every person. However, if you have more than four or five direct reports, you will need to make choices every day. Maybe you can't talk to every person every day.

For your dedicated one-on-one time:

- Set aside an hour a day.
- Concentrate on three or four people per day.
- Prepare in advance and make sure your direct reports prepare too.
- Follow a regular format with each person, customized for that person.
- Always start with top priorities, open questions, and any work in progress.
- Consider holding these conversations standing up, with a clipboard in hand (to keep them quick and focused).
- Don't do all the talking.
- Don't let anybody go more than two weeks without getting together.
- If you manage people who work other shifts, stay late or come in early.

- If you manage people in remote locations, conduct your one-on-ones via telephone with no less rigor and discipline than your in-person one-on-ones.

How many people can you possibly manage this way? How many one-on-one dialogues can you maintain? The answer is different for every manager. Be honest with yourself. If you are not able to maintain an ongoing one-on-one dialogue with an employee, you are not managing that person. That person is in a sink-or-swim situation. If you have eight people, you can talk to everybody one-on-one once or twice a week. If you have sixteen people, it's going to be a whole lot harder.

If you have a chain of command, use it. Focus first and foremost on any managers you manage. Talk with them about how they are managing. Every day, coach them on the management fundamentals—make sure they are having regular one-on-ones with their direct reports. All the way down the chain of command. Managers need to be taught to practice the fundamentals at every level. If you don't, your chain of command is not going to work.

No matter how many people you are responsible for managing, you have to make choices every day about how you are going to use your management time.

What Is High Substance?

High substance means rich in immediately relevant content, specific to the person and the situation, with a clear execution focus.

Talk about what's going right, wrong, and average. What needs to be done? What are the next steps? And the next steps after that? Spell out expectations in clear and vivid terms, every step of the way:

- Remind each person of broad performance standards regularly.
- Turn best practices into standard operating procedures and teach them to everybody.
- Use plans and step-by-step checklists whenever possible.

- Focus on concrete actions within the control of the individual employee.
- Monitor, measure, and document individual performance in writing.
- Follow up, follow up, follow up, and provide regular, candid, coaching-style feedback.
- Follow through with real consequences and rewards based on performance in relation to expectations.

Ask really good questions:
- "What do you need from me?"
- "What is your plan? What steps will you follow?"
- "How long will this step take? How long will that step take? And the next?"

Listen carefully:
- Evaluate how well the employee understands the requirements of the task at hand.
- Pay close attention to the gaps in her approach.
- Keep asking questions. Facilitate.
- Adjust as needed.
- Never forget, you need to make sure every single employee knows every step of the way exactly what is expected of her—exactly what she is supposed to do and how.

One-on-ones are also where you answer employees' questions as they come up. Get input from your employees throughout the process. Learn from what your employees are learning on the front line. Strategize together. Provide advice, support, motivation, and even inspiration once in a while. Together you'll need to regularly think through potential obstacles and pitfalls—make back-up planning part of every work plan. Anticipate and prepare. Train and practice.

Together you will uncover on a regular basis what can be done and what cannot, what resources are necessary, what problems may occur, what expectations are reasonable, what goals and deadlines are sufficiently ambitious, and what counts as success versus failure.

Every step of the way, stay on the lookout: Are there problems hiding around the corner or just below the surface? Small problems that can be solved now so they don't turn into bigger problems soon? Resources we need to obtain or else figure out what to do instead? Key people in interdependent roles we need to be engaging?

What's changing? What's about to change? What might change soon? Don't be embarrassed that things change. It wasn't your idea. Uncertainty is the new certainty, right? When priorities change, expectations change. That is just further evidence that telling people what to do and how to do it is critical. After all, no one else is going to tell each employee:

- Which priorities have shifted and changed today
- What they are supposed to focus on today
- What the expectations are today

That's it. That's how you break free from the vicious cycle. It's all about making those routine conversations much, much better. It's just the fundamentals—practiced consistently with rigor and discipline.

The People List

No matter how consistently you practice the discipline of the one-on-one dialogues, you will quickly find that you need to customize your approach with every person. Every employee is different. What works with one person may not work with another. Every employee presents unique needs and expectations and corresponding challenges for the manager.

I spend a lot of time helping managers figure out how to customize their approach to each person. The one-on-one dialogue you build

with one employee will be very different from the one-on-one dialogue you build with another: why you are talking, what you are talking about, how you talk, where you talk, when, and how often.

In the later stages of my advanced seminars, I teach managers how to use a tool I call the "People List." This is a running list of all the key people with whom you need to be engaged in a one-on-one dialogue right now. Maybe it includes your boss or your bosses, peers, and counterparts in other groups or departments, internally and externally. But first and foremost, your People List should include your direct reports, always. Anybody who considers you his boss deserves a place on your People List, so long as that person reports to you.

You should definitely start keeping a People List. Why not start it right now? Who are all the key people with whom you need to be engaged in a one-on-one dialogue right now? Your boss? Key peers and counterparts? Definitely your direct reports at the very least.

1. Make the list; actually, make a simple spreadsheet. Write (or type) the names in a far left column of the page.
2. To the right of each name, make a note: When and where was your last conversation with that person? Regarding what?
3. Now give that last conversation a grade for structure and substance. Would you give it an A+? B? C?
4. In the next column, answer this question for each person: What should you be talking about with this person? When and where are you going to have your next conversation? And what do you need to do to prepare in advance?

That's your People List.

You should be asking and answering those questions for yourself every day until you get into the habit of the one-on-ones. Once you are really, really in the habit, your People List will change. How you use it will evolve to meet your needs. But never stop asking and answering those questions. Never stop keeping your People List. You never outgrow the fundamentals. No matter how rigorous and disciplined your

routine, no matter how advanced your management skills may become, you can always benefit from asking and answering those questions for yourself every day. Your People List will keep you closely moored to the fundamentals and keep you from slipping away.

There's No Such Thing as Advanced Management

In our advanced management seminars, I take experienced managers through one problem-solving session after another. We focus on one real life case study after another—the real employees the managers are really managing in the real world. "Who are the employees with whom you are really struggling? What are the really tough cases?"

Of course, like clockwork, the same basic cases come up over and over again—the same 27. Maybe it's the superstar whom the manager is afraid of losing, the slacker whom the manager cannot figure out how to motivate, the one with an attitude problem, or the two who cannot get along. From tracking managers before, during, and after the training, I've identified the most frequently occurring "most difficult challenges" with which managers tend to struggle and the best step-by-step solutions.

Of course, I've learned through our years of research and training that different challenges yield most readily to specially focused techniques. What's astounding, however, is how (nearly) every challenge—even the most difficult—yields to the healing, powerful, vanquishing medicine of relentless high-quality communication.

Throughout this book, I show you how to apply the management fundamentals to the 27 challenges managers most often face. Again, the 27 challenges are not enumerated in order of frequency or difficulty. Rather, I've grouped the most frequent challenges into chapters based on the larger issues they have in common:

- Leadership transitions; being the "new" manager
- Employee self-management; work habits
- Performance management

- Employee attitudes
- Managing superstar employees
- Managing despite factors beyond your control
- The need for a fresh start to an old relationship; renewal

In each chapter I examine the underlying theme and show how, almost always, the ad hoc manner in which most managers talk to their direct reports every day actually leads inevitably to the most difficult employee situations that tend to vex managers. What is the key to avoiding most of these problems and the key to solving them quickly and with relative ease as soon as they appear? High-structure, high-substance one-on-one dialogues with every direct report. With each of the most common challenges managers face within each area, I show how managers typically respond to these problems when they become aware and how these typical responses sometimes exacerbate the problems. Then I explain how to use the structured dialogue to control the situation and zero in on the specially focused techniques for continuing to grow the one-on-one dialogue in this situation.

The fundamentals are all you need.