

Throw Out The Quick-Fix Programs For Managers

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Over the years, corporations have spent billions on training programs designed to improve their top executives' management skills.

How-to-do-it manuals abound, and experts offer a variety of quick fixes.

Richard Farson, a psychologist, author and consultant based in La Jolla, says virtually all these programs work - but not for long.

The energized manager, armed with fresh human relations skills, finds his new tools generally don't fit the dynamic of the workplace. Confidence soon turns to frustration.

"When you treat predicaments as problems, you actually make them worse," said Farson. "When you lead people to control things that they are essentially helpless to control, they become more abusive."

Farson explores this unconventional concept in a new book, "Management of the Absurd, Paradoxes in Leadership," which Simon & Schuster will publish tomorrow.

Farson makes a case for heaving the quick-fix management training books and courses in favor of education.

"The best managers don't even worry about control," he says. "They bring vision to the group. They help clarify things. They inspire people and have courage, sensitivity and compassion."

His book explores the reasons why training programs don't work, delving into human behavior that often defies conventional thinking.

Among the paradoxes Farson explores are:

- Big changes in a company are more easily made than small ones. He cites the case of a chief executive officer who once said it took several days to get a person to move a desk 10 feet but only one day to reconfigure the medium-sized electronic company by eliminating several levels of management.
- The better things are, the worse they may feel because employees' expectations tend to grow, leading them to grumble more.
- Managers should give up a management technique that works because the technique loses power when employees begin to perceive what it is and feel manipulated by it.

Farson says he views his book as an optimistic message that will allow managers to think of themselves as pretty good the way they are and to deal with employees through their wisdom rather than with faddish management techniques.

"The trick is to find social architecture that will work continually," he says.

Farson was co-founder of the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, the founding dean of the school of environmental design at the California Institute of the Arts and president of Esalen Institute.

He currently is president of the International Design Conference in Aspen, a leading forum for environmental design.

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