

*Psychology Today*  
May/June 1996

**MANAGING:**

# The Art of the Absurd

Human organizations are complex and paradoxical.

That requires us to turn our thinking about management upside down. Do not, however, confuse absurdity with stupidity.

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My contrarian view of human relations and my interest in paradoxical thinking have been with me so long that I'm not sure where they began. Perhaps the most important contribution to my thinking has been my 30-plus years heading organizations. Being both a psychologist and a CEO has given me an appreciation of the absurdities of organizations, and how nothing works quite the way we have been taught.

## **1. In management, as in parenthood, it's not so much what we do as what we are that counts.**

What parents do deliberately appears to make little difference in the most important outcomes - whether their children grow up to be happy or unhappy, successful or unsuccessful, good or evil. There is no question that parents can and should do worthwhile things for their children, but it's what they are that really matters; for example, whether they are sensitive and caring or cold and indifferent. Most children adopt the characteristics that define their parents, whether their parents want them to or not.

The same dynamic occurs in management and leadership. People learn - and respond to what we are. When you think about it, perhaps that is the way it should be. What a dreadful world it would be if we actually did possess the skill to convey something other than what we really are.

## **2. Remember what we might call the "reciprocity rule" of human behavior: over time, people come to share, reciprocally similar attitudes toward each other.**

That is, if I have a low opinion of you, then while you may for a time hold a high opinion of me, it is unlikely your high opinion will persist. Eventually you will come to feel about me the way I feel about you. If we genuinely respect our colleagues and employees, those feelings will be communicated without the need for artifice or technique. And they will be reciprocated.

## **3. If, in life, paradox is the rule and not the exception, then the popular view of management as a matter of gaining and exercising control is badly in need of correction.**

Management based on techniques of control and manipulation cannot succeed in matters of the absurd. But that hardly means the manager is lost. Effective leaders and managers turn confusion into understanding. They see a bigger picture. They trust the wisdom of the group. Their strength is not in control alone, but in other qualities - passion, sensitivity, tenacity, patience, courage, firmness, wonder.

People need to know they are dealing with a genuine person, not someone who is "managing" them. It has to do with the inappropriateness of technique. Think of the difference between seduction and romance.

## **4. Communication has its limits.**

Many supposed communication problems are actually balance-of-power problems. That is why it is probably unwise to

introduce completely open communication into a situation in which there is a large discrepancy of power. It is only when the balance of power is relatively equal that truly candid communication can and should take place.

### **5. Listening is more difficult than talking.**

People are more likely to change when we reverse the flow of communication - that is, when people are not talked at, but when they themselves have a chance to talk.

### **6. Praising people does not motivate them.**

Praise may, in fact, be perceived as threatening. After all praise is an evaluation, and to be evaluated usually makes us uncomfortable - even if the evaluation is positive.

Instead of reassuring people about their worth, praise may be a way of gaining status over them. Giving praise establishes that you are in a position to sit in judgment.

### **7. Every act is a political act.**

By this I mean that every management act in some way redistributes or reinforces power. Our inability as managers to think in political terms tends to make us look at people as if they have personal problems, when many times their problems are a result of their place in the power structure of our society. Managers understandably resist having to think in political terms, but the alternative is to run headlong into trouble that we won't see coming.

### **8. Improvement does not bring contentment but its opposite.**

Absurd as it seems, the way to judge your effectiveness is to assess the quality of the discontent you engender, the ability to produce movement from low-order discontent to high-order discontent. The theory of rising expectations speaks to a discrepancy between what people have and what they now see is possible to have. That discrepancy is the source of discontent and the engine for change. In the Soviet Union, it was the great reformer Gorbachev, the architect of glasnost and perestroika, who was the one to be forced out.

Higher-order discontent and the felt need for action lead many to quit their jobs. Quite unnecessarily, I suspect.

### **9. Big changes are easier to make than small ones.**

People respect bold moves and are more likely to buy into a change if it is big enough to withstand any attempt at countering it.

### **10. We learn not from our failures but from our successes - and the failure of others.**

Learning from success happens when, as in athletics, you are on your game, things are working, anything seems possible - and you are stimulated by your achievements. When we are doing things right, it gives us the strength to continue - which leads to our greatest successes.

On the other hand, a series of failures can demoralize us. Nevertheless, it's important that we fail. We need to fail often. If we don't, it means we're not testing our limits.

Very few of us are capable of responding to another's success with the same sensitivity that we extend to that person's failure. We know better how to empathize with a person who is suffering than with one who is succeeding.

### **11. There is no right way to be a manager.**

Completely different types of leaders enjoy equal success, and part of the reason is that employees have the power to make their leaders look good.

Organizations survive because most people are trying to do their best and will try to keep things going under any

circumstances.

## **12. Planning is an ineffective way to bring about chance.**

By and large, organizations are not good at changing themselves. They change more often as a result of invasion from the outside or rebellion from the inside. An organization's members tend to be blind to the aspects of the organization crying out for change.

Planning may not be effective at assessing the future, but it can be a good way to assess the present. It forces people to think about consequences. It can put management on an "anticipatory alert," so that it is better prepared for the unexpected. The process, not the product, is what is important.

## **13. Fix situations, not people.**

Situations, more than individuals, are what produce difficulties, even though it usually looks as if it is individuals who are fouling up. Change reporting relationships, enlarge or reduce the expectations of the job, set up flextime arrangements, and so on.

Circumstances are powerful determinants of behavior. Nobody smokes in church.

## **14. It is more important for managers to like their employees than for their employees to like them.**

We all tend to like people we do things for more than people we do things to, or people who only do things for us.

## **15. There are no leaders, there is only leadership.**

The real strength of a leader is the ability to elicit the strength of the group. Leadership is less the property of a person than the property of a group.

True leaders are defined by the groups they are serving. People who are leaders in one situation are usually followers in another. In a well-functioning group, the behavior of the leader is not all that different from the behavior of other responsible group members.

## **16. Much of the job of executive development is an unlearning process - getting rid of barriers to perception and wisdom and judgment.**

Leaders need to regain trust in gut reactions. If any one thing can be said to be true about good leaders, it is that they trust their instinct.

## **17. Lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for.**

They tend to be the most important and humane ones. They require us to live up to the best that is in us, to perfect ourselves and our world. Lost causes cannot be won, but because they are so crucial to us, we nevertheless must try.

The absurd lesson is to recognize what is a lost cause - and work on it anyway.

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9/4/96