

“Harmonious Management” from the Perspective of Communicative Psychology

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What Constitutes Good Management? The Ideal

“The ideal manager must have the dignity of an archbishop, the selflessness of a missionary, the persistence of a tax official, the experience of an auditor, the working capacity of a slave, the tact of an ambassador, the genius of a Nobel Prize winner, the optimism of a shipwreck victim, the resourcefulness of a lawyer, the health of an Olympic athlete, the patience of a nanny, the smile of a movie star and the thick skin of a hippopotamus.” Ingo Kleist, domestic policy spokesman for the SPD’s City Parliamentary Group, on the ideal profile of Hamburg’s new chief of police.

Pointed wording aside, this bon mot contains a great deal of truth. The demands placed on a modern manager are extremely diverse and contradictory. Confronted with constantly changing situations, today’s managers require a broad “personal spectrum”, i.e. a seemingly superhuman range of internal capacities for reacting and acting. However, superhuman qualities are neither a good nor a realistic ideal for mere mortals. For this reason, our training courses for managers focus on another ideal, namely that of second order sovereignty. What does this mean?

First and Second Order Sovereignty: Combining Professionalism with Humanity

People aiming for first order sovereignty always endeavor to be “master of the situation”, to have perfect control of all circumstances, never show weakness, and be unassailable and invulnerable. In short, they seek to be the perfect professional, without a single human weakness or vulnerability, undeterred by anything or anyone, and never showing the slightest doubt.

In contrast, we prefer a more human concept of professionalism that incorporates human weaknesses and fallibility, human sensibilities and momentary lapses. This concept of professionalism is perhaps less suited to pilots in the cockpit, where any flaw can rapidly become dangerous. However, it is all the more apposite in the context that forms our current focus, namely interpersonal encounters.

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Translated from the German by Cathie Petersons.

What Constitutes Good Management

If second order sovereignty, i.e. the combination of professionalism and humanity, is the ideal for which managers are striving, how does this influence their behavior in an actual situation? How should they react, for instance, if an employee who is still new to the team approaches them in the following way: *“Well, I’m a bit unsure. I can’t shake the feeling that my new colleagues are giving me the cold shoulder. It seems like personal conversations are broken off as soon as I approach...”*

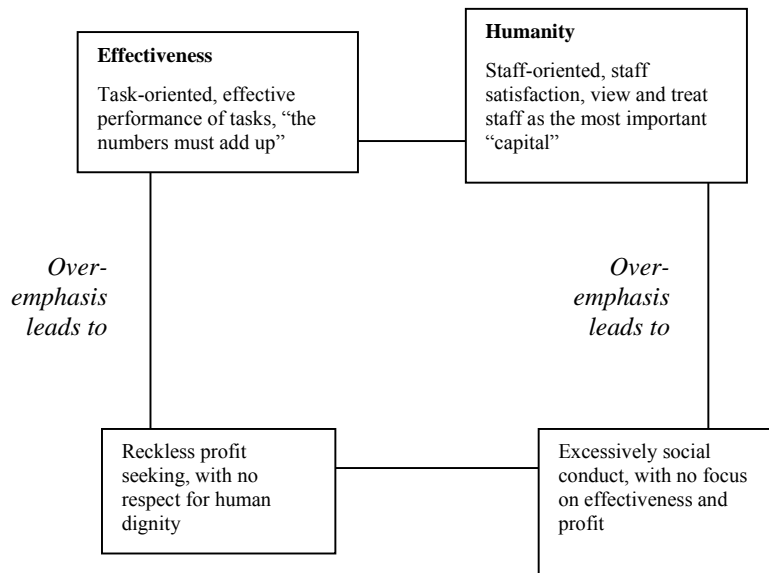
Should the manager feel responsible and initiate team integration measures? Or would it be better to encourage the employee to tackle the problem herself, and perhaps coach her on how to solve it? Or would the right approach be to put the matter on the agenda of the next team meeting, and have the team discuss it together? Or would it in fact be a big mistake to make an agenda item out of an issue that is still unclear and potentially does not involve everyone?

We are working on the assumption that good and correct management behavior must be based solely on the specific characteristics of a situation and the distinctive features of the human state of mind within it, and thus that only the manager involved in the specific situation will be able to find a suitable response. There is no universal formula for correct management behavior. Instead, managers must discover and develop such behavior themselves, thereby making it their own minor “homemade” invention. Each individual is thus the most qualified expert on their own management situation and themselves.

However, even experts can need advice. For this reason, we hope that the following materials will help you to discover which management behavior is best suited to the different situations you face in your everyday management duties. Self-discovery is based, on the one hand, on a clear awareness of the situation in which I find myself and the system within which I operate, and on the other hand, on a clear awareness of myself in this situation. Let us thus endeavor to develop this dual internal and external awareness. We will begin with the basic situation in which I find myself as manager. The contradictory nature of the demands is a fundamental characteristic of this situation.

The Manager at the Interface of Humanity and Effectiveness

Managers are confronted with very diverse, and often conflicting, demands in their daily routine. The following is an example of one of these fundamental contradictions: On the one hand, a manager must ensure that targets are reached, tasks performed, outcomes produced, deadlines met, and consequently that shareholder value is maximized. However on the other hand, managers must also bear in mind that “the staff are the enterprise’s most important capital”, that only satisfied staff work well, and that the right atmosphere must be maintained in the team. What appear at first glance to be irreconcilable opposites are not infrequently the two sides of the same coin, two positive orientations that, if viewed in isolation and lacking the counterweight provided by the other side, run the risk of spiraling into a negative extreme. They will, however, successfully complement each other where they exist in a positive interface (the model underpinning this description, namely the values and development square, will be explained in Chapter 2.4):



A balance must thus be struck between the positive values of effectiveness and humanity in order to avoid spiraling into either extreme in the long run. However, it must be a *dynamic* balance. Managers will ultimately become aware of this when a situation requires a decision to be made that approaches one of the extremes, such as the dismissal of a capable employee. In this context, it is even more crucial not to lose sight of the other positive value and to restore the balance as quickly as possible, for instance by behavior towards the employee to be dismissed that is as open and fair as possible in the situation.

Managers often gain direct exposure in their daily routine to the contradictory nature of these and other demands made of them by different individuals, which result in what is known as an intra-role conflict.

The “Sandwich Position”: Are Managers the “Meat in the Sandwich”?

The intra-role conflict experienced by middle managers is also known as the “sandwich position”, as these demands are made from above and below. When you think of all of the role-partners that want something from the manager, such as staff, superiors, personnel developers and clients, you get the impression that middle managers must feel like the “meat in the sandwich”, trapped in their managerial role and no longer capable of free movement (see Diagram I, p. 18 and compare with Schulz von Thun, 1998, pp. 166 ff.).

The role-partners in the diagram are not even a comprehensive list of all the people who can influence a manager in reality. Others include colleagues, representatives of other sections of the enterprise, the works council, etc, all of whom are able to exert differing degrees of pressure on the manager by various means.

Examining the Managerial Role: Developing a Clear Approach

Managers must develop their own approach to avoid actually becoming the “meat in the sandwich” trapped in the “sandwich position”. They must have a clear understanding of what they do and do not consider their tasks, where they will accommodate others, where they draw the line, and what they in turn expect from others. Managers who lack this clear understanding and try to be all things to all people run a serious risk of becoming torn between their role-partners with their different expectations. If they have not set their boundaries and taken a clear stance in time, they will be held responsible for the omissions that will inevitably arise, due to the impossibility of simultaneously meeting all of the conflicting expectations, and will become a “multiple whipping-boy” (see Diagram 2, p. 19 upper section, and Schulz von Thun, 1998, p. 168).

Grumbling and complaining about the manager’s indisputably difficult role will be of no assistance. The only thing that will help is an active examination of the role, that enables you to develop a conception of self and a clear approach to how you intend to perform the role. You must assume the role and make it your own, rather than allowing the role and the demands, real and sometimes perceived, of others to set the agenda. This requires the manager to internally accept the role, to really want to manage, and to be convinced of the purpose of good management. It also involves a willingness to invest time in management activities, instead of focusing primarily on the specialist field. Accepting the role also means performing it differently from former colleagues, which can often be especially difficult. Managers who unequivocally accept their managerial role and take a clear stance regarding the expectations leveled at them will subsequently be able to influence the expectations made of them in the future.

Why are we speaking in such detail about the sociology of the role in a book on the psychology of “talking to one another”? We have learned from Karin van der Laan and Jens Hager (see Van der Laan & Partner, 1992) that a clear understanding of the role is the crux of successful communication. Anyone lacking a clear and unambiguous notion of the “what” cannot compensate for this with the “how”. The “what” does not simply fall into your lap when you assume the role, but must instead be developed through a reflective examination of the role and be acceptable to yourself.

A clear approach does not mean stubborn obstinacy along the lines of “I’ll do it my way, regardless of what you say or think”. Your own point of view must always be proved through dialogue. The manager must also maintain a balance in this context. A clear understanding of the role must be linked with dialogue, and with a willingness to be questioned and receive advice: “It takes two to find the truth.”

That was the good news. The “meat in the sandwich” is not helpless against these contradictory expectations, but can become an active figure by developing a clear role-based conception of self. But now for the bad news: Your role-partners won’t exactly be rushing to embrace you, because a “yes man” is always more agreeable in the short term. On the contrary, you will need to talk to each other a great deal and fight out many issues.

It is especially difficult to maintain this clear approach in dealings with your own superior. For this reason, many managers reject the role-based conception of self as pure theory: “*We really are just the ‘meat in the sandwich’ and will stay that way because we have inflexible superiors, who reject open communication, put us under pressure and limit us.*”

Evil Culprits and Poor Victims? Who is to Blame for Everything?

Boss-related problems are a very common form of unhappiness in the world of work. It is also completely incomprehensible that in this enlightened age of social responsibility there are still so many discouraged and frustrated employees, whose creativity has been stifled, and who blame bad management for this, probably with justification. Managers at all levels of the hierarchy often complain in our courses that their superiors have never taken part in a communication seminar: *“They need it at least as much as we do. If they ever set a good example, for instance by communicating more openly, we could follow their lead. They hand out glossy brochures full of management guidelines, but never set an example with any of it.”*

However, defining yourself as the “meat in the sandwich” makes a significant contribution to perpetuating this major problem. A typical interpersonal vicious circle can arise between managers and their superiors in this way (see diagram on p. 22, see Chapter 2.2 for an explanation of the vicious circle model).

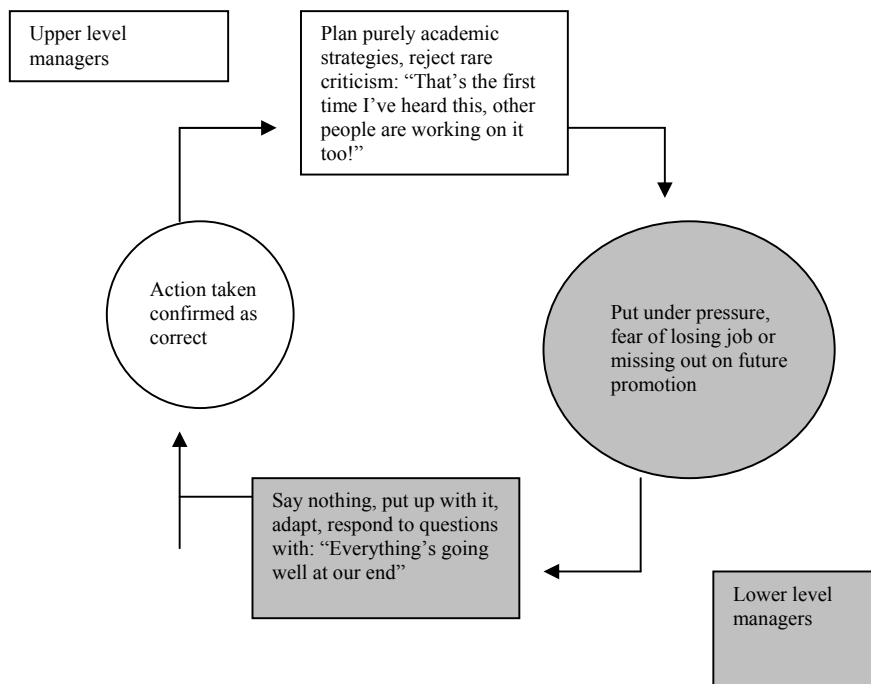
Upper level managers have the following perspective: *“We do our job (e.g. planning a restructure). When we ask our staff (lower level managers) how the restructure is progressing, we get positive feedback from most of them. It is only in individual cases that something doesn’t work in quite the way we had envisaged. The failure in these cases is probably due to individuals. However, we generally feel that our course of action has been the right one.”*

However, the lower level managers see things differently: *“With these constant changes, no one ever really knows where their desk will be tomorrow, or if they will still even have one. So even if you know that the measure is doomed from the start, it’s better to just grin and bear it and try to somehow get by. If one of the bosses asks me if we are making progress with the restructure, I’d rather just tell him what he wants to hear. What would be the point of telling him that everything works differently in practice? If his plans don’t work, he’ll just accuse me of incompetence.”*

If both sides were able to recognize their part in this vicious circle, they would understand that no one is solely to blame, and no one is purely a culprit or a victim, but instead that both sides are contributing to the continued existence of the vicious circle. Both are players, and thus both have the power to end the vicious circle. However, breaking out of the vicious circle requires considerable (second order) sovereignty from both sides. The superiors must demonstrate an ability to accept criticism and “rebelliousness”, and even to welcome it, without seeing it as undermining their authority. The lower level managers must display not only the bravery and courage to also occasionally make themselves unpopular, but also the ability to present criticism in such a way that the recipient does not feel scorned or even *despised*, but instead as if his/her efforts and achievements are appreciated. Combining recognition and criticism in this way is admittedly a rare talent, but one that can be learned, and which is an element of developed humanity applicable to many other life situations.

Seeing yourself as a participant in a vicious circle carries both a burden and an opportunity. The burden: Anyone who recognizes their own share of the responsibility can no longer place all the blame for a difficult situation on the other party. We know many people who believe they spend their whole lives surrounded by a bunch of incompetents, and who gleefully derive a kind of psychological sustenance from this diagnosis right until their retirement. The opportunity: Once you stop seeing yourself as just a poor victim, you also realize that you can change your own position. In other words, everyone within an enterprise simultaneously holds a share of

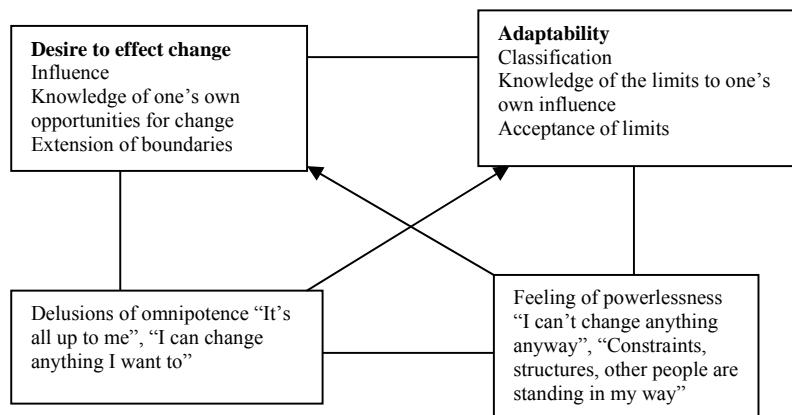
responsibility and also possesses opportunities for change. No one is all-powerful, nor is anyone powerless. Each individual is able to extend the boundaries of their potential to effect change. However, everyone must also accept that there are limits to their influence within the complex system of an enterprise (see diagram p. 24).



Setting Your Own House in Order

As a first step, managers can of course “set their own house in order”, i.e. effect changes within their area of responsibility, their own department or group. This too is not always easy, however, as it very often involves dealing with employees who are resistant to change. Nonetheless, changes within your own team have the greatest chances of success, as this is where your influence is strongest. In an external context, there is a possibility that positive changes will attract attention, and that what has been successfully achieved in one team, e.g. more open communication, will “rub off” on other teams. Another possibility is to make a direct request for changes, e.g. to your immediate superior. This does run the risk of “rubbing someone up the wrong way”, but the upside is that unfavorable circumstances may actually be changed.

At issue here is the reconciliation of adaptability with the desire to effect change. The manager’s daily routine continually sees different values and demands emerging within a single situation, thereby necessitating the development of a clear understanding of the role. The “meat in the sandwich” thus becomes a figure capable of action.



Reconciling the Different Elements? Dealing with the Diversity of Roles

However, a completely different aspect of management must also be considered. Different situations require a diverse repertoire of roles. Depending on the situation, the manager must sometimes act as an understanding coach who advises his/her employees, sometimes as the “leader of the pack”, who clearly says what’s what, in a third situation as a lion tamer, who cracks the whip, etc. (See Diagram 3. The format of the diagram is a reference to the metaphor of the internal team that is discussed in Chapter 2.3). Diagram 3 provides examples of some of the roles the manager must play in various situations. The manager is thus not only required to be an:

- *Expert in his/her field*, who is familiar with the subject being worked on, but also a
- *Manager*, who guides and coordinates the work of other experts and holds the reins, without being involved in the technical details, and a
- *Staff coach*, who assists the staff to tackle difficult situations, by listening and giving advice, and a
- *Team developer*, who seeks to improve the team’s ability to cooperate, recognizes conflicts within the team, and helps the staff to resolve them, and also a
- *Bearer of responsibility*, who carries the burden of responsibility for decisions and for the results of the team’s work, and a
- *Lion tamer*, who also occasionally has to lay down the law, point out consequences and accept them if necessary, and the
- *Leader of the pack*, who is a role model for his/her staff and takes them in new directions, but who also clearly says what’s what, and last but not least an
- *Employee*, who also has to answer to a superior and is an employee of the enterprise.

As people and team management play a much greater role nowadays than previously, new roles continue to be added as time goes by. The modern manager is thus a master (as leader of the pack and lion tamer) and a servant (as staff coach, team developer and employee) all rolled into one. Internalizing these psychological contrasts and also “accessing” the right role at the right time places heavy demands on the manager. There is always a risk that the expert will show

up when the staff coach is required, for example, or that the understanding coach will end up fighting a losing battle when the lion tamer is needed to lay down the law.

Harmonious Management

These reflections bring us back to the question of what constitutes the ideal. How do I communicate properly in a management role? Our answer: It is all a matter of harmony, which has three components:

1. In keeping with my nature, i.e. in accordance with myself
2. Appropriate to the system and situation, i.e. in accordance with the relevant context
3. Metacommunicative, i.e. through discussion with my role-partners on the “how” of joint communication and cooperation. This is because what I consider “harmonious” can be horrendous to you. It’s good for us both if we can talk about it, and not so good if we can’t

What do these individual components mean?

In keeping with my nature: “In keeping with my nature” means acting in accordance with myself, my values and priorities, my characteristics and feelings, and above all with how I see myself in the role of manager, so that I can really stand by what I do and say. My management behavior must be suited to me, and cannot be any form of assumed behavior that is perhaps only the result of training.

Behaving in keeping with myself thus requires a certain level of clarity regarding the feelings I harbor within myself, the thoughts that preoccupy me, the values that guide me, and the way in which I wish to perform my role as manager. However, this clarity is almost never present from the outset. Especially as regards the contradictory demands made of a manager, situations repeatedly arise in which you initially only have an uneasy feeling or “haven’t got things sorted out in your own mind”, in which you are “of two minds” or feel “torn” between the alternatives. If I adopt the motto that “managing people begins with myself”, the first step would be to find out exactly what is going on within me, and which inner voices can be heard in this particular situation. It is only once I have gained this self-insight that I can bring my behavior into line with my inner self and act clearly and powerfully in an external context.

As this inner clarity is often very difficult to attain, we will focus on how to achieve self-insight in detail in various sections of this book (see Chapters 2.3 and 3.2).

However, the motto “managing people begins with myself” does not end there, because an entirely self-referential orientation can ultimately result in behavior that is “out of line”, or inappropriate to the situation.

Appropriate to the situation: For this reason, it is also important to consider what the situation will permit or even require. Being appropriate to the situation means acting in accordance with the external context, the current situation, and the entire system within which I operate. Thus, instead of thinking only of what is appropriate to myself, I must also consider what is appropriate to the other party, who is also in a specific internal state of mind, and may currently be very agitated, annoyed, frustrated or enthusiastic. The circumstances under which we are meeting must also be considered. Are we old friends, and/or are we in a hierarchical relationship, i.e. in which roles are we meeting one another? Is the situation tense (e.g. due to our enterprise’s difficult economic circumstances) or relaxed? Are we pressed for time, or can we

discuss everything at our own pace? Which other circumstances (e.g. politics, restructure, the economy, ecology, processes, products) are affecting the situation? All of these aspects and, depending on the situation, some completely different ones as well need to be taken into account. My management style must thus vary considerably in different situations, e.g. in a crisis as opposed to in a relaxed situation (more on this in Chapter 2.5).

However, you can have too much of a good thing in this context too, by focusing solely on the requirements of the situation and thereby becoming a type of “situation puppet”, whose strings are pulled by other people or “the circumstances”. Only a successful combination of all aspects of myself as a person and the situation will result in the management behavior that we call “harmonious”.

Metacommunicative: Even if I believe I have succeeded in behaving in a harmonious manner, it does not automatically follow that all of my role-partners will necessarily agree. The effects of my management behavior have not yet been discussed. Instead of adopting the attitude that: *“I have acted to the best of my knowledge and belief, so now think about how you’re going to deal with it”*, your attitude should be: *“I have acted to the best of my knowledge and belief, and now I’m curious to see how you deal with it.”*

Moreover, testing my management behavior does not mean that I want to be all things to all people. We have already described where that will lead (see “multiple whipping-boy”). Instead, it involves finding out which positive or negative reactions to my behavior I will have to deal with, enabling me to consider the consequences for my future actions.

The Metacommunicative Management Style

The attitude underpinning this behavior is also known as the “metacommunicative management style”. As no management style is universally applicable to all people in all situations, as a manager, I must continually engage in discussions with my role-partners: *“Given the way you are and the way I am, how can we get along with one another and cooperate effectively? There is no prescribed ideal for this, instead it is something we need to develop and discover together.”*

In addition to the aspect of testing your own management behavior, the aspect of team development also plays a role in this context. Regular metacommunication promotes the staff’s ability to cooperate. An atmosphere of openness will gradually develop, enabling a constructive exchange to be conducted on the type of cooperation and its potential for improvement. In this way, the employees should become independent individuals who act responsibly and contribute their opinions and ideas to the cooperation. (See Chapter 3.4 and Thomann, 1998, pp. 245 on the implementation of metacommunicative discussions.)

