Preventing Under-Management

The Under-Management Epidemic, by Bruce Tulgan

Highly-engaged managers consistently have the best track records of high productivity and quality, strong employee morale, and retention of high performers.

To prevent under-management, managers must:

1. **Become extremely knowledgeable about the tasks and responsibilities of each direct report, which includes enough details of their work to know:**

   - What can be done every day and what cannot be done.
   - What resources will be necessary.
   - What problems may occur.
   - What expectations are reasonable.
   - What goals and deadlines are sufficiently ambitious.
   - How to fairly and accurately monitor and measure success and failure.

2. **Provide direction, guidance, support, and coaching on a regular basis.**

   - Help identify resource needs and help fulfill them.
   - Help identify potential problems and help solve them.
   - Monitor and measure the workload of each person.
   - Evaluate performance in order to determine when tasks, responsibilities, and projects are a good fit or a bad fit; when a direct report requires more information or additional training; when a direct report is having a bad day, or a good day; when a direct report needs advice, motivation, inspiration, or counsel.

3. **Spend time with every direct report in regular coaching sessions to remind direct reports about overall performance requirements and standard operating procedures; spell out concrete expectations; and clarify goals, deadlines, and parameters.**

   Although the manager must take charge and offer clear direction, getting input from direct reports throughout the process is also important. Managers should try to:

   - Reach a mutual agreement about what is reasonable.
   - Anticipate problems and resource needs together.
   - Strategize together about how to reach ambitious targets.
   - Give direct reports some ownership and participation in the goal-setting process.

   Over time, the two key factors to keep track of are:

   - How much responsibility should be delegated to each direct report?
   - How often should the manager meet with each direct report?

4. **Monitor and measure performance in writing on an ongoing basis to be able to champion and reward success and deal with failure. Judge the cause of successes and failures, and document that judgment.**

   A "manager's notebook" can be used to keep a chronological record of daily coaching sessions with each direct report. Information included in the manager's notebook could include:

   - Reminders about overall performance standards, goals, deadlines, guidelines, and parameters.
   - Plans for anticipated resource needs to avoid problems.
   - Questions asked by direct reports and any answers.
   - Requests made by direct reports and any answers.
   - Anything promised in exchange for specific performance.
   - Any other special issues that require follow up.

5. **Understand, accept, and embrace the new reality that managing people has become a day-to-day negotiation.**

   - Abandon the top down assumptions of hierarchical leadership.
   - Do not be insulted when direct reports resist the manager's authority and make demands.
   - Constantly answer the questions that are always on every employee's mind:
     - What's the deal around here?
     - What do you want from me?
     - What do I get for my hard work . . . today?

6. **Decide what is not negotiable, have the guts and discipline to relentlessly communicate these requirements, and hold every direct report accountable for them.**

7. **Give every employee a chance to set and meet ambitious goals and deadlines on a regular basis, have an accurate ongoing analysis of each employee's performance, and document all of this clearly and consistently in writing in a daily record.**

8. **Make every effort to tie rewards (and detriments) to measurable instances of employee performance and nothing else.**

9. **Make every effort to tie non-financial rewards to performance. Bargaining chips managers can use to negotiate for increased performance include:**

   - The manager's power over resources and work conditions.
   - The assignment of tasks, training opportunities, scheduling, and recognition.
   - Exposure to decision-makers.
   - Working in one location or another.
   - Working with one co-worker or another.

10. **Make every effort to find every employee's "needle in a haystack"--his/her unique needs and wants--and use those needles to create "unique value propositions" for direct reports.**

11. **Deal with performance problems immediately and aggressively.**

    - As soon as a direct report's performance starts to slip, start meeting more often and focusing the person on more narrow goals and deadlines, with constant reminders about performance requirements and standard operating procedures.
    - If the problem persists, diagnose it and take swift action. Be prepared to have a direct performance improvement conversation, and then follow up aggressively and try to turn the downward spiral into an upward spiral.
    - If this effort fails, be prepared to remove the consistently low performer.