

The Manager's INTELLIGENCE Report

An insider's fast track to better management

June 2008

Lead experts beyond their comfort zone

Technical experts, such as programmers, engineers, and designers, are well-known for their passion for their subject areas, yet they're also as interested in moving up as anyone. To attract and retain these talented individuals, and to make the most of their skills, train them in areas that will prepare them to manage and lead. Business educator Arlene J. Mayzel suggests three key areas of preparation:

1. Help them "learn the business."

Experts benefit from seeing how the entire organization operates. This means more than explaining corporate goals and strategy. It also means communicating how the various divisions and departments work together—or can fail to—in order to achieve those goals. Of special value to experts is learning how

their particular expertise fits into the overall effort.

2. Improve their people skills. Many technical experts can write or deliver presentations well. However, succeeding as a leader and manager also requires communicating with people who don't share the same expertise—which is more of a challenge than it first seems.

3. Coach them in delivering results.

Experts are certainly used to delivering results in their own areas. Nonetheless, using programs, contracts, mechanical innovations, or spreadsheets is quite different from delivering profits or developing skilled employees. Respect your experts, but don't underestimate their need for a broader perspective.

—Adapted from *BusinessWeek Chicago*

Be positive about departures

It's as important to maintain a positive relationship with a departing employee as it is to get off to a good start with a new hire. Before employees move on or retire, you need their collaboration and can benefit from their insights. Emphasize the positive as soon as an employee announces his or her departure:

• Respond positively but realistically.

Tell the truth—at least a courteous version of it. With an employee whose work you've valued, express your appreciation in detail. With employees whose work has been less valuable, you might say that you hope they've found a new position that's a good match for their skills.

- **Clarify the departure process.** Review security measures, confidentiality requirements, forms, equipment to return, and so on. Emphasize the commonsense nature of these measures, rather than making them sound like threats.
- **Ask for cooperation.** For example, you might want departing employees' assistance in completing in-progress work, updating job descriptions, and coaching their replacements.
- **Prepare for the exit interview.** Tell employees what will be covered, so that they can consider these sometimes sensitive issues at leisure instead of being surprised by them. Employees will say more, and you'll learn more.

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www.managementresources.com/mir

Food later, talk now

Parties, receptions, and other social gatherings where you plan to meet with customers and other contacts can be enjoyable as well as productive events—just don't enjoy yourself too much. Yes, we're referring to food and drink. You can't concentrate on what your conversation partners are saying when you're balancing a drink and a plate of snacks and have a mouthful of food. (Forget about shaking hands!) Simplify life: Eat something before the event so your appetite is quelled and you can concentrate on the business reasons for attending.

Generous perk or recruiting advantage?

Here's a giveaway that might have some payback. When professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers offers some of its MBA interns a job at the end of the summer, the offer includes a vacation at Walt Disney World in Florida. The kicker is that even interns who turn down the job are welcome on the trip. The firm seems to be thinking that sometime in their careers these talented people will be job-hunting again, and they'll remember one firm's classy giveaway.

—Adapted from Inc.com

School's out, so employees are too

June often brings the end of the school year, so prepare for absences by employees who haven't yet worked out daycare arrangements for their kids. Early in the month, ask that employees who'll need to miss days let you know as soon as possible. Then line up (or have these employees line up) other workers to cover their duties. You might allow employees to take vacation days to do this, or arrange for them to make up the time through longer workdays or over weekends.

Rehire former employees? Maybe . . .

Suppose a former employee, one who left your organization on good terms, wants to return to the fold. If your organization allows former employees to return and you're positive about this person, open negotiations—but proceed with caution. Treat this as a true hire, not simply a return to service:

- **Read the résumé, conduct the interview.** Scrutinize this applicant as a prospective employee as well as a former one. Examine his or her record at the current job. Why the departure? What results were achieved? Most important, has he or she developed new skills or improved on weaknesses? Use what you know about the applicant and probe as you would with anyone.
- **What jobs do you have open?** Avoid having to say, "Oh, good, we've got Anna back! Now, what are we going to do with

her?" If the same job is open, will the applicant be truly interested in it anymore? If there's a different job, has the employee developed the necessary skills or would he or she be willing to?

- **Lay out the terms.** In one such situation, diversity consultant Gail Evans set several conditions for an employee's returning. First, this would be the last time the employee could leave and return. She would have to prove herself on the job, as would any new employee. Moving expenses wouldn't be paid. The applicant would have to stay at least 18 months to earn a good recommendation the next time she left. In this case, the former employee thrived in tenure number two—but treat your would-be returnees on their own merits.

—Adapted from *Pink Magazine*

Think before demoting

Deciding whether to demote an employee is tricky. The pros and cons are both compelling. On the positive side, a once and potentially still valuable employee is not lost. On the negative side, he or she has less power, money, and status, and not least, must endure coworkers' knowledge of the failure. Before you act, ask yourself these questions:

- **Are your reasons clear?** As with termination, your reasons must be based on clearly stated standards that were previously communicated to the employee and on documented results and behavior.
- **Should you terminate instead?** You should be convinced that the employee wants to stay with the company and will make the effort necessary to succeed at a lesser position. You help neither the company nor the individual by setting the person up to fail again.
- **Are you prepared?** The employee will need your empathy for a considerable time. He or she will require a clear description of the new job and possibly training to do it well. The worker may also request continuation of the higher salary, either permanently or for a while.
- **Is the employee prepared?** Don't rely on your own intuition—ask the employee directly about his or her feelings about accepting a demotion instead of, say, being allowed to resign with a severance package. Allow the employee some time to read the new job description and ask you questions.
- **Is setting this precedent acceptable?** Think whether other employees, including those who should be fired, will now expect demotions as well.

—Adapted from the Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario Web site

Dodge the real risks in 'real time'

It's certainly good to stay on top of your group's work: Who's doing what, how it's going, what the problems are. It's also valuable to work with your crew on their tasks, showing them how you want things done. This is "hands-on" managing, participating in "real time," or as leadership consultant John Colburn calls it, "managing the present." However, there are risks here:

- **Overdone deference.** Even with tasks employees can and should do, your continual scrutiny and involvement may teach them to hesitate to do them until you're there to help or approve. Put your effort into ensuring that workers have documented basic principles to adapt so you don't need to be there.
- **Delayed decisions.** Your participation in making decisions about the details of your crew's jobs will certainly show them you care, but it may also influence them

to put off decisions until you're there or bump them up to you. Consider making it clear that you want to be informed of decisions when they're made but not to make them.

- **Indecisive innovation.** Innovation always includes making some decisions based on incomplete data. The more employees rely on you for hands-on assistance and decisions, the more anxious they'll be about trying new things.
- **Postponed vision.** Another risk of overmanaging the present is that you lose out on time and opportunity to do the tasks that only you can do. One of these tasks is, of course, deciding where to go rather than managing each step of the way.

—Adapted from *The Point* newsletter

Forage in online forums

Since discussion forums are proliferating online, incorporate them into your staff discussions. Agree that you'll post a question relevant to one of your staff's interests or concerns on one of the forums and see what other folks have to say. Either have the whole group agree to monitor a forum (or several) or assign one person to do so for, say, a week and to pass on the most interesting and useful posts. It's free, easy, and often productive. [Disclosure: Ragan provides such a forum at www.mymanagersnetwork.com.]

What you can delegate, consider dumping

Delegating responsibilities to your crew is certainly a good idea. It helps them expand their skills and gain a new perspective on the group's work. However, what if you're continually delegating the same tasks? Could you assign any of them to one of your staff permanently? If it's a job you don't have time for or that helps someone else develop, let it go. On the other hand, if you can afford to not—or never—do a certain task, does it really need to be done? By anyone?

Count both genders in favor of balance

Recent research by the Hudson Institute suggests a strong similarity in the attitudes of male and female managers toward several aspects of their lives and careers. The findings below underline how serious the issue of a flexible balance between work and life is to managers in general:

- **Success.** A strong majority of both men (75 percent) and women (73 percent) believes that being successful depends on doing well in their lives outside of work as well as their careers. These two areas of success are equally important to those interviewed.
- **Time.** Men (44 percent) and women (46 percent) also believe in nearly equal measures that they need to avoid spending excessive time at work to the detriment of their home lives. Interestingly, considering how much emphasis is given to the fact that people work long

hours, male and female managers both feel that they are doing well at achieving an acceptable work/life balance.

- **Support.** Both men and women acknowledge the importance of receiving help in their careers. About half of each group credit their spouses with being the most helpful individual in their lives. Thirty-six percent of both groups feel a mentor at work was the most helpful individual. Both groups also credit their education as the most important nonhuman factor in achieving their success.
- **Obstacles.** Both groups say that the biggest obstacle to their success is their own sense of responsibility to their families. For example, 17 percent of each group cites an unwillingness to relocate (and thus disrupt their families) as the major barrier to further career success.

Mentor vendors and increase profits

Office Depot, the office products and services retailer, not only buys from but mentors women-owned, minority-owned, and disadvantaged small businesses. Through its Tier One program, Office Depot helps these businesses train and develop their employees. The retailer also provides marketing and sales support, order fulfillment assistance, and customer service help. Benefits include developing viable new suppliers and strengthening the office supply industry as a whole. Not the least of Office Depot's benefits was its profit from selling over \$500 million in products from these suppliers in 2006.

Ask self-explanatory questions

One-word questions such as “Why?” “Which?” and “How?” seem very natural when you're in conversation with someone, but this shorthand can be confusing. Suppose the person you're talking to says, “I purchased a compressor online,” and you ask, “Why?” Well, do you mean “Why did you purchase instead of renting?” “Why did you purchase a compressor?” or “Why did you buy online?” Spell out your questions so the conversation can continue smoothly instead of stall for a clarification.

—Adapted from businessEvolved.com

A networker's secret resource: Names

Always take advantage of presentations, meetings, and social events to make contacts. Fine, you ask, but how is that done at a large, congested event? Use what you have—the table of name tags. Arrive early and scan the table for the names of people you want to talk to. Make a list of who's there and use it to work the room after the presentation. If you're really focused on meeting someone, wait by the table and hook up when he or she comes to pick up a tag.

Announce new employees electronically

Besides making in-person introductions, use your e-mail system and intranet to alert your group that new employees are on board. Create digital pictures of your new employees and upload them to your group's intranet site (consider setting up a photo site including all group members). Then send an e-mail containing a link to the pictures to each of your employees. The link will make it easy for employees to check out the photos at their leisure. And the pictures will help everyone recognize the new group members in their midst.

Prepare for performance audits

When your group's performance audit rolls around, take a realistic but positive approach. Being judged won't be fun; nonetheless, approach the audit as a consultation that will identify your strengths as well as areas for improvement. Add the following four milestones to your preparation process:

- 1. Start well ahead of time.** Count backward from the audit date or the start of “audit season” (the time span when unannounced audits usually occur), and allow enough time to prepare.
- 2. Do your homework.** Review your audit information—the audit's purpose, scope, standards, and processes. Think also about what's going on right now in your department and in the organization so you're ready for any current tack the investigation may take. Finally, look back at your previous audit results for issues the auditors have often focused on.
- 3. Select an audit team.** Include any of your employees whom the auditors may wish to question and also a group of

employees to assist the auditors with equipment, supplies, and so on. If you're not going to lead the team, appoint an employee who's skilled at managing details, staying on schedule, and communicating with experts (perhaps a veteran of previous audits). All should be thoroughly informed about their areas of responsibility and reminded to respond to auditors' requests willingly and promptly.

- 4. Set up an auditors' workspace.** Choose a room with a lock so the auditors' materials and possessions are safe. Include individual workstations and, ideally, a conference table. Computer plug-ins, phones, a printer-fax machine, and the usual office supplies will also be welcome.

—Adapted from the FLT Consulting Web site

Learn inside stuff—from outsiders

Make the most of what your consultants, vendors, and suppliers have to offer. Beyond their expert knowledge in their own subject areas, these folks can often pass on useful information about the way things work—really work—in your organization. Listen well, ask discreet questions, and keep secrets:

- **Who to talk to about what.** The organization chart shows the formal division of skill and power in a group, but as you know from your own group, there's more to know. Outside experts sometimes know who has the special skills or information that your group may need. Outsiders also know who the department head relies on for advice before giving approvals; these are people whose influence counts. And just as important are the people who not only can help but are willing to—people free from a parochial attitude.

- **How things really get done.** Most groups also have both official “front door” procedures for doing their work and informal “back door” ways of doing things when time is short or secrecy is useful. Outsiders learn to take careful advantage of these byways (with the permission of the people in the department), and you just might be able to do the same.
- **How long it's going to take.** Outsiders usually operate on a tight schedule, so they need realistic estimates of turn-around times on the requests they make of the people in a department. By listening to outsiders carefully and using your common sense, you'll get an idea of how long you'll really have to wait for an answer or some action. **Result:** more accurate time estimates of your own.

for ACHIEVERS only

JUNE 2008

Going nowhere without getting stuck

You have to be willing to change locations to get ahead, right? Maybe not, if you take the right approach to staying put. That's the point of a story passed on by career coach Jeffrey Garton about a man named John.

Like many people, John was divorced. He had joint custody of his daughter and wanted to stay near her. So when he was offered a promotion that required him to move to another town, he turned it down. However, John recognized that doing so would have consequences. He knew that giving up a promotion sends a message about your priorities, one that some managers could misinterpret. The job was also one that provided experience that John would need to move his career forward along the traditional advancement track within that company. And, to make matters worse, the higher positions he normally would have been eligible for at his current location were already filled by newly promoted managers. Worst case: Unwilling to go where he was able to go, he'd left himself nowhere to go.

Yet John refused to accept the worst case. He stayed focused on the key fact—he was able to remain close to his

daughter—and searched for more positives. For example, he committed himself to improving at his current job and, free of the distractions of continually imagining greener grass, he did so. As he steadily enhanced his skills, he found that he could solve problems that stumped others who lacked his focus on making the most of the present. In particular, he developed a skill for recognizing problems, designing projects to correct them, selling his vision to his managers, and carrying through. Over time, he became an expert at not only his job but at problem-solving as well. Since this was a skill that transcended any one job, he was eventually able to earn promotions without having to change locations.

It took time, but by making the most of that time instead of fighting it, he stayed close to his family and created value for his company. Not a bad bargain—or a bad model to consider.

—Adapted from *Career Contentment*, by Jeffrey Garton (ASTD Press)

CRITERIA

I want to work with people who have faced similar challenges.
I don't care whether they've succeeded or failed, so long as they've learned.
—Thomas Stemberg, cofounder of Staples



SUSTENANCE

We cannot grow on lies, especially when they come in the form of smiles
expressing one thing while we think another.
—MoriEl Randolph, personal development consultant

YOUR CAREER

Ignore the myths about self-promotion

Mention *self-promotion* to a group of managers, and generally the reaction is negative. “Bragging” and “office politics” are terms that often come up. However, are these comparisons (and other negative stereotypes associated with self-promotion) true? Not necessarily. Seen more objectively, self-promotion is the effort to communicate about yourself to your advantage—to enhance your public image, obtain a position, influence a decision, and so on. With this in mind, how well do those negative stereotypes stand up?

- **“People will know when you do good work.”** *Wrong.* The fact is, often people *don’t* ever know unless they’re told. Much good work makes things operate more smoothly, not visibly. For example, if your careful attention to a complaining customer leads to a large sale, all that will be heard from the customer is his or her order, not effusive thanks. It’s up to you to let your boss know what you added to the process, how your employees pitched in, and so on.
- **“Self-promotion is either bragging about yourself or undermining others.”** *Wrong.* Honestly disclosing your own difficulties and fully crediting your employees for their accomplishments isn’t bragging. Discussing a problematic assignment adds to your reputation for honesty. It also provides your boss with accurate information about what he or she can do to help you succeed. Crediting your employees always reflects well on you, both as a generous boss and an effective one who helps employees develop.
- **“Self-promotion only works for born schmoozers and rampaging extroverts.”** *Wrong.* Not all communications *about* you need to come *from* you. Just as you benefit from helping others receive credit, be sure your employees and peers are aware of your contributions, too. Self-promotion need not be public, either. Buttonholing a vice president at a company function is not necessary. A short, private talk will get the job done. Nor do you have to do everything out loud. A concise memo or an e-mail is often more effective. Find the way that works for you.

—Adapted from *Selling Yourself Without Selling Out*, by Gina Hernez-Broome, Cindy McLaughlin, and Stephanie Trovas (Center for Creative Leadership)

TIMING

The art of leadership hinges on knowing when to speak, when to be silent, and when to listen.

—George Kohlrieser, business school professor



RELIEF

The best way to get something done is to begin; taking action will immediately alleviate stress.

—Rosemary Chieppo, personal organization expert



RESOURCE

Once you have a good motivation, it gives you inner strength to pursue your dreams, no matter how hard it is.

—Nawang Rabgyal, diplomat

Secure balance step-by-step

One problem almost every manager faces these days is the demand to be accessible 24 hours a day by e-mail or phone. It’s daunting to think about—when will you have a personal life? Business school professor Stewart D. Friedman recommends the following tactics for convincing your boss to cut you some slack:

- **Decide what you need.** Let’s say you love your job but you need free time at night to be with your family and keep your household running. You might then recommend that you be free of answering e-mails or calls between 6 and 9 p.m.
- **Make your case.** You’ll benefit by being less anxious and less distracted because your personal life will be on track. For your boss, this change should help you be more accurate and productive at work.
- **Spell out procedures—and backups.** You might offer to check your e-mail at 9 every night, and to keep your cellphone near, just in case there’s an emergency. You might also suggest trying out these procedures in a trial run of a couple of weeks. This will give you both a chance to see whether the arrangement will work and to make any necessary adjustments.

—Adapted from *Total Leadership*, by Stewart D. Friedman (Harvard Business School Press)

The long-awaited day arrives

A manager strongly believed that all employees should show up for work on time, and every morning he watched for stragglers. Some he caught often, but he never caught Mr. Johnson, who was on time day after day and year after year. One morning, however, the unthinkable happened, and Johnson didn't show up until an hour after the official arrival time. When he did come in, it was very slowly. He was limping badly, and he had an arm in a cast and a bandage around his head. His coworkers all gathered around him, offered sympathy, and of course asked him what had happened to make him break his phenomenal punctuality record.

Addressing the boss, he explained that he had fallen down two flights of stairs, spraining his ankle, breaking his arm, and suffering a mild concussion.

The boss saw his opportunity and said, "And I suppose it took you a whole hour to fall down those stairs?"

—Adapted from JokeCenter.com

Not enough instructions

A track coach had a runner who had a lot of energy but was a little scattered when it came to following a strategy during a race. To help this runner practice pacing himself over a long distance, the coach told him to run exactly 10 miles a day for 10 days and then report on his progress.

Ten days later the runner called in and said, "Coach, it worked! I ran 10 miles each day. I now have a great sense of how long 10 miles is, and I can pace myself very well. I do have one question, though."

When the coach asked the runner what his question was, the runner asked, "How do I get home now that I'm 100 miles away?"

—Adapted from AskMen.com

Why interviewers need a sense of humor

Job-hunters are always advised to be honest during their job interviews, and of course that's good advice. Some applicants, however, take the idea of honesty to extremes far beyond what their advisors had in mind. The job-hunting site CareerBuilder.com came up with the following examples of much-too-full disclosure:

- **The personal touch.** A candidate paused on the way to the interview room to smell his armpits. Another candidate used the first few minutes of the interview to brush her hair.
- **Make yourself at home.** A candidate's cellphone rang during the interview, so she asked the interviewer to leave her own office because it was a personal call.
- **Happy endings.** When asked why he left his last job, one candidate said he had been fired for beating up his boss. A second candidate stated that if hired he might leave the job fairly soon because he expected to receive an inheritance from his dying uncle. In other words, every hiring interview question is an adventure.

HONESTY

Comedians are the most honest people in films because here's the deal: Either it's funny or it ain't.

—Jack Nicholson, actor



PROMPTING

Gently guide fortune and help determine the future by thinking far ahead.

—Robert Greene, writer



EXPECTATION

[Y]ou're not expected to be perfect. You're just expected to reach a little further for some brand new stretch goals.

—Martha Finney, leadership consultant

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

RENEWAL

Every day is a new day in the business world, where you are not defined by what you did yesterday but what you will do today.

—Melissa Vokoun, business advisor and trainer



CONTENTMENT

As you're seeking contentment, it's better to focus on your assets rather than try to compensate for your weaknesses.

—M. J. Ryan, writer

Ignore signs and crashes occur

Kalle, a brokerage manager, was enthusiastic about mentoring employees. When a longtime friend asked Kalle to hire his son Steve, whom Kalle had known for years, as a sales trainee, Kalle gladly said yes.

Steve was very personable and quickly made friends at the brokerage. Later on, however, a veteran employee told Kalle that Steve was creating problems—partying heavily, speaking cynically about the firm, and taunting coworkers. Kalle was surprised but raised these concerns with Steve. Steve denied them and asked that Kalle not reveal them to anyone else. Kalle decided to take Steve at his word, and you guessed it: Trouble followed within a few months.

Steve disrupted the office with his cynicism, borrowed money from his coworkers, harassed two coworkers who then sued the company, and used drugs heavily. He lost his job, and the firm paid a large settlement to end the suit. The story does have a happy ending, however. After four years, Steve managed to pay back the money and leave drug use behind. He apologized to Kalle for his behavior.

Yet the question remains: Why did Kalle originally let Steve off the hook so easily? Kalle's generous nature and his long history with Steve were probably factors. He might also have been unwilling to expose his judgment in hiring Steve to the scrutiny of others. However, neither personal generosity nor self-protection was the essential mistake. Instead, his error was in making his call so precipitously rather than investigating further. By being afraid of what he'd find, he ended up face-to-face with trouble.

—Adapted from *The Bullish Thinking Guide for Managers*, by Alden Cass, Brian F. Shaw, and Sydney LeBlanc (John Wiley & Sons)

Not by hard work alone

Religious leader Joseph Robinson, Jr.'s father had been a sharecropper. It was an extremely hard life but one that yielded many valuable lessons about the nature of work. One of the insights he passed on to his son was a surprising connection between leadership and—plowing. For a leader, as for a plowhand, it's tempting when the going gets tough to put one's head down and push for all one is worth. However, yielding to that impulse, honorable as it is, eventually condemns the plowhand to producing crooked furrows unusable for planting. Good plowhands keep their heads up and their eyes on where they're going. They plow straighter furrows and spot rocks and other problems before they impede progress. Leaders, despite their desire to pitch in, have to do the same.

—Adapted from *7 Leadership Imperatives from a Wild Man*, by Joseph Robinson, Jr. (Judson Press)

'Seeing' what attracts people

Evelyn Jane Burgay was an attorney and a longtime leader of Toastmasters, a public speaking organization. Psychotherapist Judith E. Pearson knew Burgay well and remembers that she never let her blindness stop her from getting things done—or from finding people to volunteer to help. Her angle was to learn people's interests and evoke them in her requests for help. Since Pearson was always interested in expanding her knowledge, Burgay wouldn't say, "I have a job for you." Instead, she'd say something like, "I have a learning opportunity for you." A small difference in approach, but one that appeals to most of us.

—Adapted from the Business Know-How Web site

Make that big deal small enough to handle

Negotiating expert Deepak Malhotra tells an interesting story that has a lesson for negotiators of complex, multipart deals: Take manageable bites when the whole is too big to swallow. An entrepreneur wanted to buy a software firm, but the value of one of the firm's assets, a patent, was uncertain. The technology covered in the patent was similar to that in existing patents, so the owners of those patents might well file suits. It would take at least a year to determine whether such suits would occur, but the entrepreneur wanted to get to work on the software firm itself as soon as possible.

The solution was to separate the patent from the rest of the firm's assets so the sale could go forward. The entrepreneur and the sellers agreed to revisit the sale of the patent in a year. To make this later negotia-

tion as smooth and safe as possible, they further agreed to a formula for pricing the patent at that time. The sale was completed to both sides' satisfaction. If you find yourself involved in a similarly complex transaction, keep a couple of useful tactics in mind:

- **Separate items from bundling.** In negotiation, items such as property, patents, and rights of all sorts are often bundled with like items for convenience. For more flexibility, separate these items for stand-alone consideration.
- **Agree to a future consideration of the issue.** The key here is to focus on the negotiation process to be used, rather than on something as vulnerable to changing conditions as value or price.

—Adapted from *Negotiation*

Help employees narrow their focus when necessary

You're probably familiar with a frustrating problem that can occur when your employees work at several tasks simultaneously. They work a reasonable number of hours on each task, yet they have trouble making their deadlines. Productivity expert Jay Arthur calls this the "lazy product syndrome." You can see the problem: They can only work on each task for a few hours each day, so while the number of working hours is reasonable, the total elapsed time stretches over too many days. When times are busy, try the following three tactics to improve the workflow:

1. **Set priorities.** When employees know what must be done first and what can be safely delayed, they can allot more time to the high-priority items.
2. **Clarify different approaches.** Trying to keep many tasks going at once is the

norm for many workers, so help them learn another way. An alternative is to work at one task until it's done or to work at it in large blocks of time, say at least for a day. Coach employees so they can do this well. For example, they'll need to stockpile the information and materials they'll be using so they won't have to interrupt their work. They'll also need to alert coworkers—and you—to the need to be left alone.

3. **Support employees when they need to focus.** Your part will be to run interference for employees in securing information and materials. You'll also need to back up the employee when he or she tells coworkers or other managers that no, he or she can't help right now.

Gear up for green

Some major outfits are linking employee perks to corporate support for "green" measures. Timberland, Bank of America, and Google all reward workers for buying hybrid cars that use some combination of gas, electricity, synthetics, and so on. The reward? Appropriately, a parking spot in the company lot—and also money. Timberland and Bank of America add \$3,000 toward the car's purchase, while Google kicks in \$5,000. Your organization may choose not to be quite that generous, but the principle is still a good one.

—Adapted from *FastCompany.com*

'Is my car okay here?'

Parking is not only expensive and hard to find, it's also dangerous in terms of car theft. Business travelers who leave their cars for long stretches are especially vulnerable. For safety, use high-rise or underground parking structures and fee parking lots. These locations offer thieves fewer escape routes and require drivers to pass by ticket-takers, pay booths, and often cameras to exit. There may also be cameras hidden on each parking level. The extra cost may pay off in security.

—Adapted from the Crime Doctor Web site

Save apologies for actual faults

It's easy to fall into saying "I'm sorry" to extremes. Once in a while it does make sense to say something like "I'm sorry you had to come to work in such hot weather" to express sympathy, but don't overdo it. Say you're sorry for things that you're responsible for, such as not providing information you promised or failing to follow up on a request. The building's broken elevator just isn't your fault.

—Adapted from *The Essential Supervisor's Handbook*, by Brette McWhorter Sember and Terrence J. Sember (Career Press)

Offer variety to senior workers

Organizations continue to search for ways to keep skilled workers on the job past retirement age. Income and health insurance are important, but a recent survey by job search site CareerBuilder.com found several other options that were attractive to this group of workers. Flexible work schedules and more control over their jobs led the list, with opportunities to mentor others, to develop their own ideas, and to pursue interests outside their jobs close behind. Sounds like folks want to keep working, but to vary their work experience.

Take gestures for what they are

Some people use gestures when they talk, but at work we're so focused on the words that we can miss important information. For example, researchers at the University of Manchester's Gesture Center point out that a person might say only that "I had trouble crossing the road" but also wave his or her hands back and forth to show that it was the amount and speed of traffic that caused the problem, not, say, a sore leg. Accordingly, when people gesture, be alert and ask follow-up questions.

Amount words vs. number words

Use amount words (little, less, much) for quantities that are being referred to in bulk; use number words (few, fewer, many) for things that can be counted individually. For example, write "We have very *little* copier paper" but "We have very *few* sheets of copier paper." Write "We've completed *less* work" but "We've completed *fewer* tasks." And finally, write "We've attempted *too much* change all at once" but "We've made *too many* schedule changes today."

—Adapted from the Bull's Eye Business Writing Tips Web site

Increase feedback, decrease resentment

Many managers dislike conducting performance reviews, but it's safe to say that many employees like them just as little. Here are some of the reasons why—and some tactics you can use to make reviews less painful all around:

- **Employees feel they receive little feedback.** Many receive only annual reviews. They then claim their managers don't understand the job. If they get low scores from an "uninformed" manager, they conclude that the manager is biased. This combination of scarce feedback and defensiveness is intensified when even once-a-year reviews are late. Take the pressure off annual reviews. Review employees' work regularly, either week-by-week or after each major task.
- **Employees feel rating systems are hard to understand.** Criteria are not thoroughly spelled out and not clearly related to every job. Employees mistrust this "one-size-fits-all" approach. Regu-

larly scheduled or task-by-task feedback will improve this situation. It's easier to say what makes for good results on a particular task than for a whole job.

- **Employees feel they don't get good advice.** In some cases, employees receive notice that some area of their work needs improvement, but they receive no specific suggestions for improvement. The manager, pressed for time, says, "We'll get to specifics later," but this doesn't happen. Just as frustrating, the manager praises the employee but then dispenses an average rating with little advice for improving. Even highly rated performers suffer the same frustrations. To avoid this mess, add advice to your regular feedback. Follow problems closely with solutions.

—Adapted from *30 Reasons Employees Hate Their Managers*, by Bruce L. Katcher (AMACOM)

Anticipate wheelchair users' needs

Structural accommodations for wheelchair users, such as entrance ramps and wider doors and aisles, go a long way in making your workplace or establishment accessible. However, it takes day-to-day effort to keep your facilities that way. Train your employees to be observant and quick to assist wheelchair-using coworkers and customers:

- **Unblock entrances.** Entrances should be kept clean, dry, and unblocked by signs, displays, and tools such as brooms and shovels so wheelchairs can be maneuvered. If you use absorbent mats near entrances, straighten them regularly so wheelchairs don't get stuck.
- **Safeguard passageways.** Keep interior ramps, doorways, aisles, and hallways unblocked by furniture, wastebaskets, displays, and so on. The easiest passages through the building and to exits should be marked with directional signs placed where wheelchair users can see them.

Employees should be able to direct wheelchair users to these routes.

- **Design storage shelves for wheelchair-using employees.** Shelves holding tools and supplies should be low enough for wheelchair users to see into so they can safely pick up the contents. Drawers should be labeled according to their contents and easy to open.
- **Create access to service counters.** Ideally, counters should be low enough for wheelchair users to use. If this isn't possible, train employees to step from behind the counter to serve wheelchair users. For example, if wheelchair-using customers need to sign credit card receipts, have employees pass them out on clipboards for easy signing. If your counter workers use wheelchairs themselves, provide enough room to maneuver near the counters.

—Adapted from *Disability Etiquette*, by Judy Cohen (United Spinal Association)

Precede confrontation with self-awareness

Dealing with employees who behave rudely, carelessly, or otherwise negatively is difficult, but not recognizing your own emotional involvement in the situation makes it more so. Perform this five-part self-analysis before you sit down to talk things over:

- 1. What's your mood?** It's common to feel anger or resentment toward an employee who's making life difficult—and just as common to deny that anger in an effort to be “professional.” However, repressed anger may upend you when you do confront the employee. Look at the facts: How have you been personally affected by the employee's behavior? What's been your reaction? What might trigger your anger again?
- 2. Have you avoided the situation?** It's common to put off confrontations—and to make excuses for doing so. Not having enough information, not having enough time, having other priorities—all present themselves as legitimate outs. Review the history: When did you first learn of the negative behavior? How many instances are you aware of? Do you really need more information?
- 3. Have you made allowances?** It's common to keep giving one more chance to employees whose work has

been valuable in the past or still is in some areas. You already know, however, that good work in one area does not cancel out problems in another. You still have to attack the trouble spot. Motivate yourself by looking again at the bad effects of the employee's behavior.

- 4. Have you personalized the relationship?** It's common to avoid confrontations with employees we regard as friends or work-family members. In fact, it's hard not to because of the benefits and pleasures of rapport with your employees. But while employees can be friends, managers still have to focus on their performance as employees.
- 5. How have coworkers been affected?** It's common to focus on only our own problems, so guard against manager's myopia. Is the employee's misbehavior well-known and regularly discussed among your employees? Has it interfered with their work or their enjoyment of their jobs? If so, this may be the time when it is appropriate to think of your employees as friends: Don't let your friends suffer unnecessarily.

—Adapted from *Coaching, Counseling & Mentoring*, by Florence M. Stone (AMACOM)



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Filter interruptions out of arguments

When you're arguing, concentrate on one aspect of the argument at a time. When people raise superfluous points, say something like, “Let's hold that idea until we finish talking about X.” One (rather drastic) way to do this is to write down incoming ideas so you can return to them when you're ready. Before you begin writing, however, be sure that the people you're talking with are okay with your pauses to write so that you're not left behind.

—Adapted from the University of Pennsylvania Web site

No work—no employees

If your 20-something and younger workers and summer help get bored on the job because work is slow, marketing and sales consultant Bob Phibbs suggests that you send them home. Not as a punishment, but as a form of motivation. His argument is that bored young workers won't do you or your customers much good anyway, so keep them fresh for the busy times. Experiment until you strike a balance: Let only the truly unneeded workers go home instead of dismissing them all—and rotate the right to escape.

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Preserve your options when leasing

Lease equipment to avoid a large cash outlay, but don't agree to an "evergreen" clause allowing the lessor to roll over the contract unless you give 30 days notice. A date that far out is difficult to monitor, giving the lessor an advantage in a legal dispute. Your best bet: an option to cancel the lease due to closure or consolidation. Shorter leases and maintenance agreements are thus easier to negotiate, even if you have to do it more often.

—Adapted from the Appraisal Today Web site

Don't slice authority too thin

Effective teams share authority among their members—but not all authority. As you parcel out decision-making power, be judicious about assigning overlapping authority. Determine which tasks truly need multiple decision-makers and which will work best if one person calls the shots. How should you go about deciding? Having multiple decision-makers who need to agree slows things down but provides some security; single decision-makers move more quickly but lack collaborators to catch their errors. For each task, decide which you need—speed or security.

—Adapted from Time-Management-Guide.com

Document your decisions

If you find yourself making the same decision repeatedly and find each iteration a strain, document them in a learning matrix. Cover the issue, your options, why you decided as you did, and the results. Since making a given decision is often spread out over time, it may be difficult to remember to gather this data, so build reminders into your schedule. Then, when a similar decision arises, compare it to the patterns that emerge from your matrix. It's a way to preserve the fruits of all that labor.

A Manager's DILEMMA

Ian loved golf and worked it into his business entertaining as often as he could justify it. That's why he was quite happy when Gregory, an applicant for a job Ian was trying to fill, mentioned that he, too, liked golf. Ian promptly invited Gregory to join Ian and his friends for a round that weekend. "It's a good way to see Gregory in a social situation," Ian rationalized to himself. However, during the round he saw more than he expected to.

In fact, Ian saw Gregory cheating. The round had included some low-stakes gambling among the four players, and everyone was competitive but not overly so. Nonetheless, Ian was positive that on two holes Gregory turned in a lower score than he actually achieved, and on another hole Ian saw Gregory move his ball from behind a bush without counting a stroke. Ian hadn't challenged Gregory on these incidents because there was only a small amount of money at stake and Ian could surreptitiously make up his friends' losses to Gregory by treating them after the round. He also had to admit to himself that he didn't challenge Gregory because Gregory had been *his* guest.

Now, on Monday morning, Ian was still bothered by what he'd seen. It was only an informal game, yet cheating is cheating, no matter what the situation. Should he treat this incident as a meaningful look into Gregory's character, or let it go? Should it affect his hiring decision?

What would you do? Send your response by fax to **312.861.3592**, Attn: **Dilemma**, by e-mail to **toma@ragan.com**, Subject: **Dilemma**, or go to the RMR Web site at **www.mymanagersnetwork.com/_forum** and scroll down to the Manager's Problem-Solver area. First-time visitors to the forum must register before posting an answer.

A READER Responds

In our March Dilemma, Dustin's employee Evan rudely interrupted Dustin's conversation with a senior manager to point out an error. Evan's point was partially correct, but Dustin was embarrassed and the senior manager was offended. How should Dustin handle the situation?

Jackie Sergent, Oxford, NC: Dustin should not take offense at Evan's interruption—it's a sign that he's listening and engaged. Dustin could have handled the situation by thanking Evan for pointing out the discrepancies he was right about and clarifying those which Evan got wrong. If Dustin acknowledges what Evan did right, Evan should feel validated and not need to contest being corrected on the other details. A good manager should be able to handle all types of commentary from listeners and adjust accordingly. Unless the corrected information made it impossible to continue the discussion without additional calculations, the meeting shouldn't have been aborted.