THE MANAGER YOU WISH YOU HAD: MAKING WORK SUCK LESS

INTRODUCTION: The Philosophy of Making Work Suck Less

Let's start with a truth that's both uncomfortable and blindingly obvious: work often sucks.

I'm not being flippant here. Whether you're overseeing a warehouse team coordinating shipments across the country, managing engineers building fintech products, or leading a group of hobbits on a quest to destroy magical jewelry, the struggles of management are universal. People feel undervalued. Systems break down. Dark lords send angry Slack messages.

But here's another truth: it doesn't have to suck quite so much.

I've spent years as a hiring manager across various industries, from logistics to financial technology. I've built teams from scratch, replaced myself with team leads, and coached countless professionals through career transitions. Throughout all of it, I've come to one undeniable conclusion: the manager makes all the difference.

Not the perks. Not the ping-pong tables. Not even the salary (though that certainly helps). The manager — how they listen, how they give feedback, how they create an environment of psychological safety — that's what determines whether work is a source of meaning or misery.

Why Management Matters

Think about the worst job you've ever had. Now, think about the best. I'm willing to bet that in both cases, your manager played a crucial role in that experience.

The data backs this up. According to Gallup's State of the American Manager report, managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores. A study from the Society for Human Resource Management found that 84% of workers blame bad managers for creating unnecessary stress. When people quit jobs, they're often not leaving companies — they're leaving bosses.

This isn't just an academic exercise. Poor management has real costs:

- Lost productivity when employees disengage
- Higher turnover rates and the associated costs of rehiring
- Reduced innovation as people become afraid to take risks
- Damage to mental health that extends far beyond the workplace

The ripple effects are enormous. And yet, most of us become managers with little to no training. We're promoted because we were good individual contributors, then left to figure out this entirely different skill set on our own.

It's like being really good at playing the violin and then suddenly being asked to conduct the orchestra. Sure, you understand music, but that doesn't mean you know how to coordinate dozens of musicians into a harmonious whole.

My Journey from Support Engineer to Coach

I didn't set out to be a management expert. I was going to be a high school Spanish teacher. New York City would be my home, teaching my career, and comedy my passion. But the winds of state certification blew my plane off course.

I found a job as a support engineer at a logistics API company. At this startup, the cliché that "you wear many hats" was true: in name, I was a support engineer, but in practice, I was a project, product, and operations manager; I was a sales engineer, onboarding specialist, and technical program manager.

Five months after starting my career in San Francisco, my manager pitched me on hiring and leading a team in Lehi, Utah. I accepted and went. I built out the team to sixteen support engineers and replaced myself with three team leads.

Along the way, I discovered what it means to truly need to delegate. I found the power of presence of mind as an indicator in the hiring process. I established coherent processes. I made mistakes — so many mistakes — and learned from them.

When I eventually joined Affirm as a Senior Technical Account Manager, I started managing a team there too. I hired, promoted, and coached. I advocated. I consoled. I

facilitated. I discovered, scoped, and defined; I encouraged, I refocused, I aligned. I directed and diffused. I reframed.

Most importantly: I learned the game, inside and out.

Now, I help others make work suck less. Because if there's one thing I've learned, it's that being a good manager isn't about having all the answers — it's about knowing the right questions to ask.

How to Use This Book

This isn't a traditional management book full of buzzwords and corporate speak. You won't find jargon here, and I solemnly swear not to use the word "synergy" unironically. Instead, this is a practical guide to the very human art of helping people do their best work.

Throughout these pages, you'll find:

- Real stories from my experiences and those of clients I've coached
- Practical frameworks for handling everything from difficult conversations to career planning
- Exercises to help you reflect on your own management style
- Templates you can use for common management scenarios

You might notice I use a lot of references to *The Lord of the Rings*. Not just because I'm a nerd (though I am), but because these stories provide a shared language that helps illustrate key management principles. If Gandalf can manage the complex dynamics of a fellowship with vastly different skills, backgrounds, and even species, we can probably handle a cross-functional team meeting.

The book is divided into four parts:

1. The Foundations of Good Management: Core principles that underpin effective leadership
2. Practical Management Skills: Tactical approaches to everyday management challenges
3. Building Your Management Career: Strategic guidance for your own professional journey
4. Personal Growth as a Manager: Developing the self-awareness that separates good managers from great ones

You don't need to read it in order. If you're facing a specific challenge right now, feel free to jump to that section. Having a hard time giving feedback? Head to Chapter 4.

Wondering if it's time to leave your job? Chapter 5 has you covered. Trying to figure out if an MBA is worth it? Skip to Chapter 8.

But if you're starting from scratch, beginning at the beginning will give you a solid foundation to build upon.

The Manager You Wish You Had

Throughout my career, I've heard countless stories from people about "the manager they wish they had" — someone who would listen, who would advocate for them, who would help them grow, who would see them as human beings first and employees second.

My goal with this book is to help you become that manager.

Not because it will make you popular (though it might). Not because it will advance your career (though it will). But because creating workplaces where people can thrive is one of the most meaningful contributions you can make.

After all, we spend about a third of our adult lives at work. That's too much time to spend being miserable or making others miserable.

So let's dive in. Let's figure out how to make work suck less — for your team, for your organization, and yes, even for yourself.

Because the manager you wish you had? That can be you.

CHAPTER 1: Presence of Mind - The Ultimate Hiring and Management Tool

Why Technical Skills Aren't Everything

I was a hiring manager at a few different companies, from the logistics space all the way to fintech. And I would have made the same hiring decisions across all of those teams. Regardless of the context — warehouse or office, packages or loans, inventory management or API support — the people that did the best job were the people that could try something new, learn from that experience, and get better the next time.

TL;DR: Hiring managers want candidates that can learn.

Let me share a story that illustrates this perfectly. Back at the logistics company, we were interviewing for a technical support role. Two candidates stood out on paper:

Candidate A had a computer science degree and three years of experience with the exact stack we were using. Their resume was a laundry list of technical qualifications that matched our job description almost perfectly.

Candidate B had a background in customer service at a retail store and had spent the last year teaching themselves to code through online courses. Their technical skills were clearly less developed, but during the interview, they walked us through a problem they'd encountered while building a personal project and how they systematically figured it out.

Care to guess which one we hired?

Candidate B is now a senior engineer at the company.

Why? Because Candidate A could demonstrate knowledge. Candidate B could demonstrate learning. And in an environment where technologies, requirements, and challenges constantly evolve, learning beats knowing every time.

Don't get me wrong — technical skills are necessary for all lines of work in some capacity. But they do not prove you can adapt, that you can ask relevant questions, that you get it.

This is what people mean when they say "the education system is broken," "they're just teaching you to regurgitate information," "we need to be teaching critical thinking in schools." In too many cases, high marks in school are explicitly tied to an ability to demonstrate knowledge. But if knowing was all it took, why has Wikipedia not run every occupation out of business?

The Value of Adaptability Over Knowledge

Even if you formally learned a technical skill, the job is going to be different than what you learned. That is a fact. Whether you have more to learn or less to learn, you will have to learn on the job.

I see two possible scenarios for how starting your career went:

1. You learned a concrete technical skill in a formal context, maybe you got a degree or certification in it. But when you started the job, you found that the

tangible work of it was different from school. You had to be taught, or had to learn by doing, how to do the tasks of the job.

2. You did not learn a concrete technical skill in a formal context, so when you found yourself a job, you had to be taught, or had to learn by doing, how to do the tasks of the job.

In both cases, you showed that you can learn on the job, and what's more, you had to. There are no roles in existence that do not require you to learn on the job.

The key to making a change in your career—or being successful in your current role—isn't showing that you can already do the job, it's showing that you can learn how to do the job.

Think about the roles in your organization. You can divide all roles along the dimension of dynamicity: will you be doing the same thing over and over again? Or will you encounter a new problem that you will be expected to navigate, learning and balancing the needs of those around you along the way?

More importantly: which of those two roles do you want to spend doing 40 hours a week working at?

Companies like Comcast manage out any autonomy and ingenuity, by design. They take a Henry Ford, assembly-line view to work and workers, and they break roles in places like support centers down into scripts. They make it so that "anyone can do it."

Same for Amazon warehouses and deliveries. Same for software developers at Oracle (there's a reason for the term "code monkeys"). These companies have made a strategic decision to prioritize repeatability over adaptability.

But here's the thing: any work where you repeat the same tasks without a clear service to others, without ownership over your work, or without novelty to it will suck.

Don't get me wrong, even with all of the things above going right, work can still suck. But without them, it will definitely suck.

How to Recognize and Cultivate Presence of Mind

So what exactly is this "presence of mind" I keep mentioning? It's not just being alert or paying attention, though that's part of it. It's a quality that encompasses:

- Situational awareness: The ability to read the room, understand context, and adapt accordingly
- Critical thinking: Questioning assumptions and approaching problems systematically
- Emotional intelligence: Understanding both your own emotions and those of others
- Adaptive learning: Being able to transfer knowledge from one domain to another
- Comfort with uncertainty: The ability to make reasonable decisions with incomplete information

As a manager, you need to both identify this quality in potential hires and cultivate it in your existing team members.

Recognizing Presence of Mind in Interviews

Here are some indicators I look for during the interview process:

1. How candidates handle unexpected questions

   Rather than asking pre-packaged technical questions with "right" answers, I pose scenarios that don't have obvious solutions. I'm not looking for perfect answers—I'm watching for their thought process.

2. Their ability to say "I don't know"

   Candidates who confidently admit what they don't know and then discuss how they would find out demonstrate security in their learning capability. Those who bluff or try to talk around gaps in knowledge often lack the self-awareness needed for continuous improvement.

3. Questions they ask

   The quality of a candidate's questions often reveals more about their thinking than their answers to my questions. Do they ask about the context behind a problem? The impact of potential solutions? The experiences of users or teammates?

4. How they talk about past failures

   Everyone fails. What matters is what they learned and how they applied those

lessons going forward.

Cultivating Presence of Mind in Your Team

As a manager, you can help develop this quality in your team:

1. Create psychological safety

   People need to feel safe to admit when they don't know something or when they've made a mistake. This starts with how you respond to uncertainty and failure.

2. Ask better questions

   Instead of asking "Did you finish the report?" try "What challenges did you encounter while working on the report?" This signals that you value their thinking process, not just completion.

3. Provide context, not just tasks

   Explain the why behind the what. When people understand the larger purpose of their work, they can make better judgment calls when circumstances change.

4. Encourage constructive dissent

   Make it clear that thoughtful disagreement is valuable. You want people who will push back when something doesn't make sense, not just execute blindly.

5. Recognize and reward learning

   Celebrate not just achievements but also lessons learned. Share stories of your own learning moments.

Case Study: Building a Team That Learns

When I moved to Utah to build out a support team for the logistics company, I had to hire rapidly—we needed to go from zero to sixteen people in less than a year.

I could have focused solely on technical qualifications, looking for people who already knew everything about shipping APIs and logistics. Instead, I prioritized presence of mind.

We hired people with backgrounds in retail, education, customer service, and even a former cake decorator. What they had in common wasn't technical knowledge—it was the ability to learn quickly, think critically, and adapt to changing circumstances.

The result? Within six months, our team was handling complex technical support issues more effectively than teams with "more qualified" individuals. When the company's needs changed—as they inevitably do in startups—our team adapted quickly while others struggled.

The people that were the most successful were always the ones that could learn. Show you have good sense, and the world is yours.

Looking for Learning in Your Team's Work History

As a manager reviewing your team members' growth potential, look at their work history and think about the things they had to learn. Here are the kinds of questions you should be asking:

- How have they approached problems in the past?
- How have they improved processes at their place of work?
- How have they resolved conflict?
- How have they taken the initiative?

Ultimately, all of these questions are coming back to one idea: how well do they learn?

You're not looking for stories where they immediately knew the right answer. A stronger story than:

"I changed the format for sending escalations to warehouse managers; we saw these escalations resolved 40% more quickly."

is:

"Initially, all escalations were written free-form, so there was no structure to them. I started off defaulting to a sort of letter-writing format. I found the information I packed in there was often missed, so we ended up having a lot of back and forth. Bit by bit I adjusted how I would write these escalations, ultimately moving toward a split approach: I would have one section with a bulleted list of what was being asked, with a second section outlining the reasoning. I asked the folks in the warehouse for feedback and

heard that they did appreciate having both: they wanted the at-a-glance information, but having the reasoning also built a lot of trust between the support team and the people touching the product. When we reviewed how this impacted resolution time, we actually saw this format sped it up by about 40%; we rolled it out to the team after that."

I will concede, the detail provided in the second example is longer. It is less concise. But it gives so much more clarity on the thought process, it gives enough information for the other person to see how they came to the solution. A great outcome without a reflection of how you got there makes it seem like a fluke. A great outcome with an explanation shows a pattern.

Showing that you have the ability to try, test, and tinker in a thoughtful way is miles better than stumbling upon a single solution without an idea as to how. Stating you improved an outcome shows you could solve one thing. Explaining how you tried, learned, and improved shows you can solve anything.

Technical Skills vs. Presence of Mind: Finding the Balance

Let me be clear: technical skills matter. A surgeon needs to know anatomy. A programmer needs to understand algorithms. An accountant needs to know tax law.

But technical skills are often the price of entry—the baseline requirement to even be considered for a role. They're necessary but not sufficient.

Think of it this way:

Technical skills determine if someone can do the job today. Presence of mind determines if they can do the job tomorrow.

As a manager, your role isn't just to assess where people are now, but to envision where they could be with the right guidance and opportunities.

This applies not just to hiring, but to development plans, promotion decisions, and team assignments. The team member who consistently demonstrates presence of mind might be better suited for that challenging new project than the one with more technical experience but less adaptability.

Closing Thoughts: The Learning Organization

As a final thought, consider that organizations, like individuals, need to learn and adapt. When you build a team of people with presence of mind, you're creating the foundation

for a learning organization—one that can evolve with changing circumstances and continuously improve.

The manager who values presence of mind isn't just building a better team for today; they're building a resilient team for whatever tomorrow brings. In a world where the only constant is change, that might be the most valuable skill of all.

In the next chapter, we'll explore another critical aspect of effective management: understanding the difference between needs and expectations, and how this distinction can transform your approach to leadership.

Enjoyed the sample? Buy the full book here!