

FlexBulletin #107: FINALLY, Let's Turbocharge Manager Habits

By Paul Rupert

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“Our managers would be far more effective with serious training – but we rarely do it”

For more than two decades I have worked with, educated and trained thousands of managers of diverse skill levels. I recall a conversation with a project manager tasked with a very early remote work project.

In response to his Best Practices query, I asked about the interactive skill level of the participants. I also probed for the company's commitment to the training required to prepare managers and work groups to excel in this new way of working. A transcript of part of that long ago conversation follows:

(Me) *“Remote work benefits from advanced listening, speaking, feedback, and conflict resolution skills. These can be taught, but take some time and focus.”*

(He) *“Can these be done in a 2-hour session, because we haven't built them in?”*

(Me) *“An intro, some procedure, maybe – but behavioral change takes some time.”*

(He) *“Well two things we lack are time and money. Our timeline is tight and moving these people offsite is a cost-cutting, not cost-incurring strategy. What's Plan B?”*

When it comes to developing managers, Plan B often turns out to be ‘doing less with less’

For the forms of flexibility, Plan B was – and often still is – a limited *procedural training* (policy, technology and accessibility standards) and a hope that managers and teams will figure out the rest. The exchange above occurred 20 years ago. I would love to report that such conversations are ancient history and things have improved tremendously.

On the procedural front, especially with telework, online supports and even some live sessions have gained ground. But unfortunately, the broader and deeper transformation and manager and work group development our workplaces need for true and broad flexibility still lag behind.

And that need is increasing dramatically. Thinned out staffs, tightened budgets and extreme time pressures have left little room for perfecting new ways of working. Among the factors putting pressures on, and testing the skills of managers and work groups are:

- ❖ The massive Millennial cohort wants customization in schedules, development and balance
- ❖ The still huge Boomer cohort is just beginning to seek flexible retirement
- ❖ As all demographics age, the pressures for many forms of work-life balance diversify
- ❖ Diversity imperatives giving way to genuine inclusion require a range of new high-level skills
- ❖ Flexibility programs (one-size-fits-all or just-pick-one) are being replaced by fluid hybrids
- ❖ Advanced wellness programs include individual and group activities that challenge schedules

Changing habits requires greater effort, not less

Of course not all new initiatives require *new skills*. An example: current moves to eliminate annual performance reviews may entail new tools and procedure, but not necessarily new skills. But the changes imposed by the demographic and scheduling challenges above must overcome not only old attitudes and behaviors – but deeply engrained *habits*.

These are sometimes summarized as “culture” and more commonly referred to as “the ways we do things around here.” These habitual ways of approaching central ways of working are more pervasive and powerful than simple behaviors or outlooks. Successful people in an organization have mastered and perpetuated these habits along the way. They are not easily changed.

Habits are rarely overcome by simple education or exhortation. Even dysfunctional habits typically need to be consciously replaced – hopefully by more productive habits. To understand what new habits need to be cultivated, it's helpful to understand the old habits that stand in their way.

- *Millennial cohort* A single word that defines this group is: “customization.” It is the opposite of the common managerial habit of insisting on “one-size-fits-all” in these diverse matters. The pervasive habit of blanket assumptions cannot succeed with a group that seeks tailored development, hybrid and changing schedules and its emerging version of work-life balance.
- *Assertive Boomers* This massive cohort wanted many of the same things as Millennials, but frequently tolerated much less. Managers got into the habit of hearing their requests and failing to respond. The lack of healthy negotiation that resulted will be put to the test as valuable older workers want to phase into retirement. A parallel habit evolved among managers of supporting or tolerating part-time schedules with early-career female contributors. The far more common habit facing older workers wanting to cut back has been and is to “just say no.”
- *Diversifying Balance* Changing demographics pile on ever new and changing demands for greater employee control and manager and group flexibility: roving telework, serial part-time, on-ramps and off-ramps, lengthening leaves and vacillating child care pick-up times are authorized in policy. But they run into habitual scheduling and the demands of others that assume traditional scheduling.
- *Inclusion Challenge* Enhanced diversity sets the stage for broader inclusion, but does not guarantee it. The traditions and habits of separateness and exclusion die hard. Overcoming them requires an assault on a complex set of habits and behaviors, of biases and assumptions that can be deeply entrenched and highly resistant to change.
- *Flex Hybrids* The habit of saying “No” to all forms of flex has slowly given way to some openness to single forms of programmatic flex. But few manages and workplaces have evolved the habit of continually negotiating a range of options distinct for each person.
- *Wellness Disruptions* As wellness initiatives broaden their reach into companies, they add one more pressure on traditional scheduling habits. Individual and group activities organized around internal rhythms represent new values conflicting with “the way we do things around here.”

The great thing about habits is that just as they are formed, they can be reformed

Great changes are underway in our rapidly evolving workplaces. Managers need to get ahead of them rather than fall further behind. The time for periodic proclamations and briefings is behind us. Initiatives that identify, tackle and change the traditional habits borne largely of the industrial age are needed. Next week’s Bulletin will outline a framework of habits that support the respectful and inclusive workplace of the future. And we will suggest the inventive style of training for managers and workgroups that can sustain those workplaces.

Best regards,
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