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Guides to a changing workplace

[In the last two FlexBulletins (see Archive at http://www.rupertandcompany.com/flexbulletin.htm) we addressed (in #24) the age-old "floodgate" question - "What if we offer flexible schedules and everyone wants them?" While decades of experience should have negated this concern, it still persists among many. As possible explanations for this enduring skepticism, we suggested: 1) distrust of employees 2) doubt about managers and 3) faith in face time. Bulletin #25 addressed attitudes toward employees; this issue explores frequent doubts expressed about managers.]

I joined with a number of you and several hundred other colleagues at the Working Mother Work-Life Congress in New York on October 27-29. In a conversation about the challenges of flexibility, we discussed the perennial need for manager training. Everyone was a little surprised when I described the flexible management training regimen we used to deliver to companies in the earlier days of flexibility.

In 1996-2000, it was common for client companies to prepare for a flexibility launch by committing all managers to a 4-, 6- or 8-hour live training session. Doubts about the ability of managers to handle these new ways of working drove significant interventions. Ironically, these days, when the perceived value of flexibility is much higher, the commitment to direct manager training is usually lower or non-existent. Why does this matter?

How and why managers are doubted   We said in explaining the floodgate syndrome that "Most leaders will openly salute the strength of their line managements while privately expressing concern about their ability to hold the line against employee excess." The strongest doubt about managers and flexibility in many companies is that when push comes to shove, managers don't actually manage all that well. What is the source of these concerns?

Flawed incubation, flawed gatekeepers   The management structure of organizations knows best the process for manager selection and development - and its limitations. The skill sets, skill levels and maturity of new and developing managers cannot, by definition, be superior. Tens of thousands of managers are really supervisors drawn fresh from the line. While they might be excellent candidates for management, they need training, mentoring and examined experience to become managers. Many senior managers hold the view that they cannot trust many of their managers to maintain boundaries and say "no" when needed. And so the fear of the floodgates finds fertile soil.

There are several factors that contribute to this skepticism about the quality of line management:

1. Technical selection dominates   In many organizations the preponderance of managers is promoted on the basis of their technical or content knowledge and tenure rather than on the basis of their demonstrated core skills and managerial aspirations. Negative effects of this include:
> *Lack of managerial experience may reflect lack of interest in gaining key skills*
> *Comfort with technical content may reinforce micro-managing, a flex challenge*
> *For many newer managers, saying "no" to former colleagues can be demanding*

2. Interactive skills are limited   If your approach to flexible work arrangements involves employee proposals, a negotiation process and manager decisions, there is a core set of what we call interactive skills that are either helpful or essential to the process. Even if a new manager has decent training, it is rarely the case that s/he has already acquired or receives robust training in the vital capabilities of:

> *"Mutual respect" tools - avoid assumptions, pay attention, listen intently*
> *Conciliation - negotiate respectfully for outcomes with broad mutual gain*
> *Directness - fluency and comfort in saying "yes", "no" and surely "maybe"*
> *Maximization - Capacity to monitor promises, adjust deals and terminate*

3. The conventional is rewarded What we call "culture" in organizations is in part a web of habits that are repeated and reinforced. In any organization, certain habits are rewarded, defining the path to promotion and providing a guide to acceptable behavior. Typically it is conventional habits and approaches, not unconventional ones that lead one upward. Again there is irony in the fact that the very conventionality that helps create managers can lead senior managers to question their fitness for unique ways of working. Some common habits that block progress are:
> *Face time matters - Uncomfortable managing for results, line-of-sight reigns*
> *"A" students only - Resolve challenge of selection by choosing only hi-po's*
> *Take no risks - One is seldom punished for errors that don't happen, so...*