Between 2003 and 2013, we asked 37,419 managers (from 891 different organizations), “What is the hardest thing for you about managing people?” We collected narrative verbatim responses to this open-ended question (along with others) in our on-line survey questionnaires. There were no multiple choice answers to this question. Respondents answered the question unprompted using their own original words. As a result, we received thousands of idiosyncratic responses. Still the vast majority (87%) of responses (32,554) fell into one of ten most common challenges. Indeed, a strong plurality (43%) of responses (16,090) pointed to one of two challenges --- clearly the top two challenges facing managers: “Not enough time…” (24%, 8,981) and “Giving negative feedback…” (19%, 7,109). Another 44% were distributed among nine more challenges. Among the remaining 13% of respondents, 5% were entirely idiosyncratic, while 8% of respondents mentioned at least one of nine common challenges.

What is the hardest thing about managing people?

#1 NOT ENOUGH TIME... or too many people to manage (span of control)... Insufficient time to attend to managing direct-reports due to other non-management tasks and responsibilities. (24%)
#2 GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK… to employees regarding their performance. (19%)

#3 DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES… of the various employees… Figuring out what works for each person depending on communication style, motivations and preferences. (6%)

#4 INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT ON THE TEAM… between and among individual employees and cliques who don’t get along with each other. (6%)

#5 BALANCING BEING THE BOSS WITH BEING A FRIEND… or being a neighbor or a relative… or just being “friendly.” (6%)

#6 EMPLOYEES WITH BAD ATTITUDES… or other behavioral issues such as attendance, tardiness, personal issues, and conflict with coworkers. (5%)

#7 DEALING WITH PRESSURE AND SHIFTING PRIORITIES FROM MY OWN BOSS AND OTHER HIGHER UPS… Communicating changes to the team and help employees adapt, repeatedly. (5%)

#8 CUMBERSOME LENGTHY PROCESS TO FIRE… low performers… and/or to impose other negative consequences short of firing. (5%)

#9 INSUFFICIENT AUTHORITY AND DISCRETION TO REWARD… high performers. (4%)

#10 MANAGING PEOPLE IN REMOTE LOCATIONS (4%)
AMONG THE REMAINING 16%, THE FOLLOWING CHALLENGES WERE MENTIONED BY LEAST 5% OF RESPONDENTS:
- Managing people with a language gap (3%)
- Hiring the right people in the first place (1.5%)
- When good employees leave (1.5%)
- Getting employees to understand and follow instructions (< 1%)
- Employees with unreasonable expectations and demands (< 1%)
- Training employees so they can handle more responsibility (< 1%)
- Dealing with employees who lack basic skills (< 1%)
- Managing people who work a different schedule than I do (< 1%)
- Managing people of a different generation (< 1%)
- Moving from peer to leader (< 1%)

The Research

This WHITE PAPER is based on our analysis of RainmakerThinking’s twenty years of ongoing workplace research since 1993. The research has not concluded and our study is ongoing. The findings in this WHITE PAPER result from our analysis of data collected in our TEN YEAR WORKPLACE STUDY (2003-2013) against the benchmark findings from the data we collected in our prior TEN YEAR STUDY (1993-2003).

OUR TEN YEAR WORKPLACE STUDY-- 2003-2013

From September 1, 2003 through August 31, 2013, we collected data from the following sources:

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS: We conducted qualitative interviews with 6,098 managers and 3,177 non-managers (from 362 different organizations); 419 of these interviews have been longitudinal (repeated interviews over the ten year period). Our interviews have followed several different question formats and
have been conducted by various individuals (but primarily by Bruce Tulgan directly) using various means, including in-person, via telephone, and via email.

FOCUS GROUPS: We conducted in-person 407 focus groups including 1,466 managers and 2,978 non-managers (from 53 different organizations). Our focus groups have followed several different question formats and have been conducted by various individuals (but primarily by Bruce Tulgan directly).

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES: We collected narrative verbatim responses to open-ended questions in our on-line survey questionnaires from 37,419 managers and 61,797 non-managers (from 891 different organizations). Our surveys have followed several different question formats and have been conducted by various individuals using various means, including in-person, via telephone, via email, and via our web-site. The primary open-ended question we have asked consistently of managers is, “What is the hardest thing for you about managing people?” The primary open-ended question we have asked consistently of non-managers is, “What would you like to change about your working relationship with your current direct manager?”

INTERACTIVE SEMINARS: Our management trainers led 840 interactive seminars including more than 24,000 participants in 218 different organizations. (Bruce Tulgan personally led 356 interactive seminars logging more than 1,000 hours with more than 10,000 participants from 104 different organizations).

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES QUESTIONNAIRES: We collected detailed management practices questionnaires completed by senior executives from 618 different organizations. The questionnaire has included different question formats.

ACCESS TO PROPRIETARY DATA: We reviewed internal survey data from more than 278 different organizations; and 32 different benchmarking surveys. This data was collected by our clients and/or by other research firms. We have been given special access to this data as part of our work with client organizations and in connection with our contributions to benchmarking surveys. This data, collectively, represents more than one million respondents.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF PUBLICLY AVAILABLE PUBLISHED RESEARCH: We consistently review available published data, including leading academic research.
OUR RESEARCH FROM 1993-2003…

In the first ten years of our research, from 1993 to 2003, we collected data from managers and non-managers alike in a wide range of organizations in a wide range of industries from in-depth interviews with more than 10,000 individuals (419 of these individuals participated in longitudinal interviews over the full ten year period); 358 focus groups including more than 3,000 individuals; management practices questionnaires completed by senior executives from more than 700 different organizations; more than 1,000 interactive seminars, logging more than ten thousand hours with hundreds of thousands of participants; survey questionnaires from more than 25,000 individuals; access to internal survey data from more than 300 organizations; ongoing systematic review of publicly available published data, including leading academic research.

OUR ONGOING RESEARCH…

Every day we continue to collect data from our in-depth one-on-one interviews, focus groups, surveys, seminars, and management practices questionnaires with managers and non-managers from numerous client organizations in a wide range of industries. As well we continue to avail ourselves of the internal survey data from our client organizations in addition to our systematic review of publicly available published data, including leading academic research. RainmakerThinking® research has been the source of twenty books (two currently forthcoming) and hundreds of articles by Bruce Tulgan since 1993. This research has also been cited in dozens of books by outside experts and in articles by journalists in thousands of articles in publications around the world ranging from the Harvard Business Review to the New York Times.