



HOW'S THE
PROJECT
GOING?

FINE.

GREAT UPDATE.
THANKS.



Quit Undermanaging

Break out of the vicious cycle
of managing on autopilot.

BY BRUCE TULGAN

Most managers spend as much time managing as they can. However, that is usually not enough.

They want to be strong, hands-on leaders. They want to be there to guide, direct, and support their team members. But most supervisors are too busy doing their own work—and answering to so many people—that they simply leave their doors open and hope that's enough.

Interdependent working relationships and cross-functional teams are handling more work today than ever before. Managers (and their employees) are responsible for managing more relationships and moving parts. In fact, most managers are not only responsible for their direct teams but also are responsible for employees in other departments working on short-term projects. Overcommitment and burnout are affecting leaders just as much as their direct reports.

As a result, many managers find there is simply not enough time to meet with their people regularly, one on one. These time-pressed leaders do their best to manage everyone in team meetings, monitor emails, and encourage people to “Let me know if you need me.” It may seem that they are spending a lot of time communicating with their direct reports, but most of that communication is low structure and low substance. They’re managing on autopilot.

There are five common ways that managers fall into that pattern: attending too many mediocre meetings; wading through a never-ending tidal wave of email; touching base, checking in, and shooting the breeze; interrupting and being interrupted; and giving unhelpful formal reviews and metrics.

Attending too many mediocre meetings

Meetings are the number one time killer for managers. Ask any manager. Most people work in highly interdependent workplaces where everyone must rely on each other to complete complex projects that have many moving pieces. When more and more people work interdependently, inevitably there are more and more meetings. Meetings are best for:

- communicating information that everyone needs to know
- enabling multiple people to discuss and solve a problem together
- building a shared team experience to foster cohesion, commitment, and motivation.

Having excessive meetings is not good. Too many people attend too many meetings in which they neither add value nor take away anything valuable. If you have five people in a room for an hour, that’s five hours of productive capacity in that room. You better make those meetings good.

The biggest managerial pitfall is thinking that team meetings are a good way to create accountability. It’s

easy for individuals to hide in a team meeting. It’s even easier to point fingers and divert attention.

Leaders who are committed to highly engaged management understand the value of a team meeting and when to call one. But even more than that, they regularly meet one on one with their direct reports, engaging in structured dialogue with them on an ongoing basis.

Wading through a never-ending tidal wave of email

Electronic communication is at everyone’s fingertips all the time. Your inbox pulls you in and demands you reply. It’s so hard to resist.

However, at its best, email is great for:

- communicating information that everyone needs to know, especially for remote team members
- documenting verbal and nonverbal communication
- maintaining asynchronous conversations between regularly scheduled one-on-one conversations.

So much email is unnecessary, duplicative, or sloppy. The most pernicious thing about emails is that mixed in with the bad emails are the important messages that matter. Individuals have to trust that the person on the other end has received, read, and understood those important messages. Even worse than a message never sent is a message sent but never received.

The solution is for managers to implement a rigorous policy for electronic communications among their teams. They should define when their teams should use email and determine a team policy for copying and blind-copying colleagues. A systematic approach that everyone can use makes electronic communications as clear and highly structured as possible.

And, of course, supervisors shouldn’t think of email as a replacement for ongoing, in-person, one-on-one meetings.

Touching base, checking in, and shooting the breeze

How are you? How’s everything going? Is everything on track? Are there any problems I should know about?

Those are questions managers most commonly ask their direct reports, yet the responses likely reveal little about what’s really going on. Managers might as well say, “Tell me you are fine. Tell me everything is going fine. Tell me everything is on track. Tell me there are no problems I should know about.”

Unfortunately, touching base makes leaders feel like they are staying on top of things. But it takes much more than rhetorical questions to effectively manage. Managers should be asking these good questions:

- What did you do? How did you do it?
- What steps did you take?
- What step are you on right now? Let me see what you have so far.
- What are you going to do next?
- How are you going to do it?
- What steps are you going to follow?
- How long will each step take?

Such questions can’t be asked and answered in a meaningful way if the conversation is just in passing.

Interrupting and being interrupted

Something pops into your head, you interrupt your employee. Something pops into that person’s head, she interrupts you.

“Do you have a minute?”

When someone interrupts, you are not at your best. Most likely you were in the middle of something. You break your attention and pull yourself out of whatever it is you were doing. You try to focus, but you are not prepared. And what you really want is to get back to whatever it is you were doing before the interruption.

Likewise, the responses managers give their direct reports (or anyone

else) after being interrupted is never going to be as thorough and accurate as if those leaders had time to prepare in advance. The same is true for any other employees.

Managers sometimes must make a decision: Is interrupting this person more important than the impact it will have on his attention and focus? If not, throughout the day, managers should keep a list of those thoughts, questions, or ideas and then address that list in the next regular one-on-one conversation with the person.

Giving unhelpful formal reviews and metrics


What often passes for structured or substantive management communication are the performance reviews that organizations require managers to have annually or quarterly with their direct reports. Three-month, six-month, and annual reviews have long been notorious for their lack of efficacy. Employees have said for years that formal reviews rarely give them meaningful, helpful feedback.

In general, formal reviews tend to fall somewhere on the spectrum between two poles. On one end, formal reviews focus on highly subjective feedback without the benefit of regular, ongoing feedback along the way. This sort of review tends to be idiosyncratic and incidental, reflecting what a manager has observed and whether there is a big win or a notable problem.

More common is the other end of the spectrum, in which reviews rely

on the elements of employee performance that are automatically tracked: the bottom-line numbers that appear in weekly or monthly reports.

Managers today have performance objectives for every dimension of their operations, usually articulated in numbers. The worthy intention is to place the focus on concrete, measurable outcomes. The problem is that usually the numbers serve as a trigger for cascading recrimination, even



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though what gets measured is often not tied directly to actions in individual employees' direct control.

Meanwhile, most leading organizations are moving toward some form of forced ranking, the practice whereby managers assign grades to each individual employee, such as A, B, and C. Sadly, while evaluation and differentiation are key, that is an exercise in annual guesswork—unless managers are monitoring, measuring, and documenting every employee's performance regularly.

Once, twice, or four times a year doesn't do the trick. Highly engaged managers monitor, measure, and document their direct reports' performance on an ongoing basis. That way, ranking and the differential rewards that go with it are clearly connected to every employee's concrete actions.

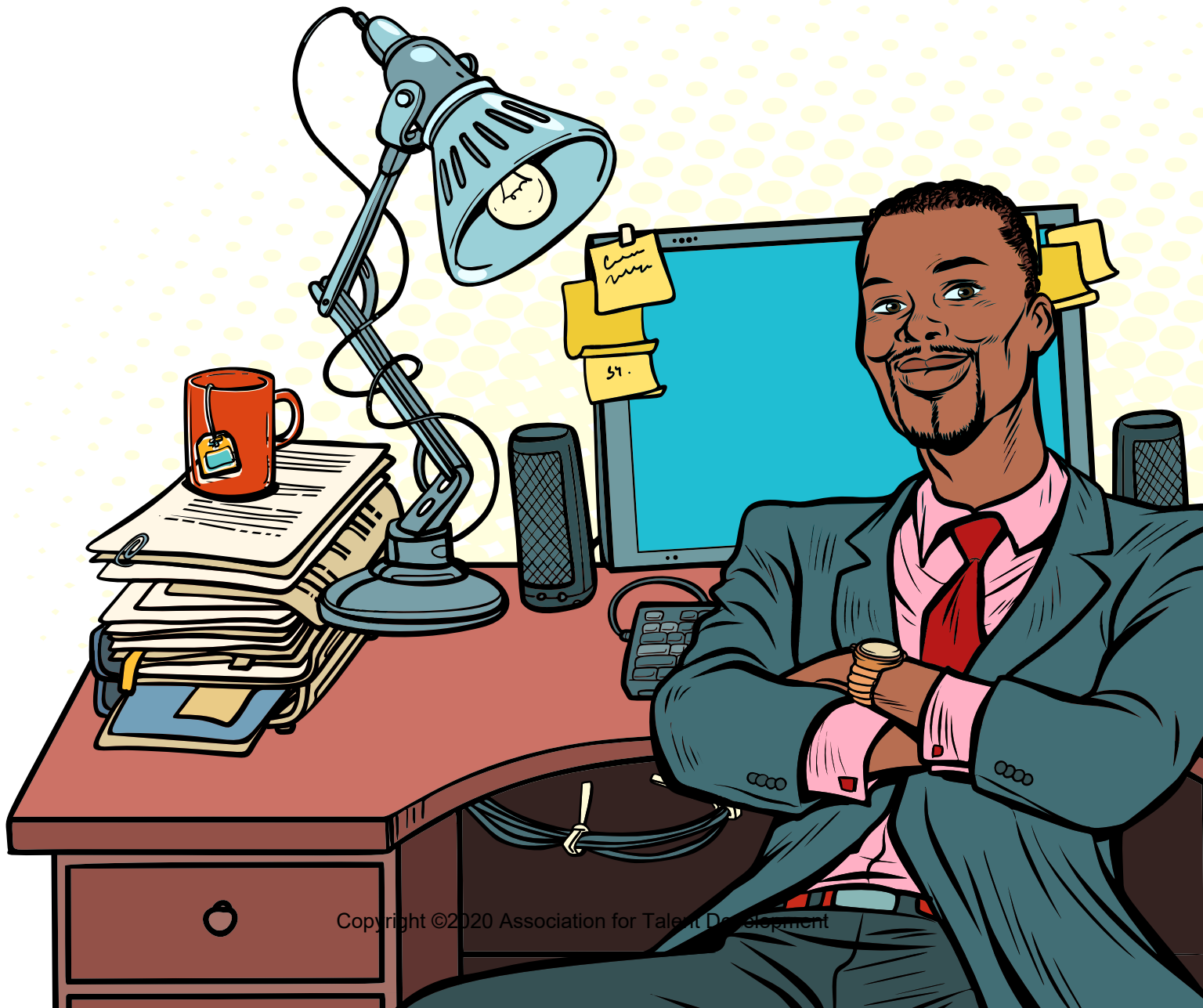
Break the cycle

Team leaders usually manage on autopilot until something goes wrong. Then, their communication becomes

more heated and urgent—sometimes even more accurate and effective.

What they don't realize is that they are stuck in a vicious cycle of undermanagement: They manage on autopilot; they develop a false sense of security; small problems have space to fester and grow; problems inevitably blow up; they (and others) are pulled into firefighting mode; and things get "back to normal," with them managing on autopilot.

How do managers break the cycle of undermanagement? The solution is



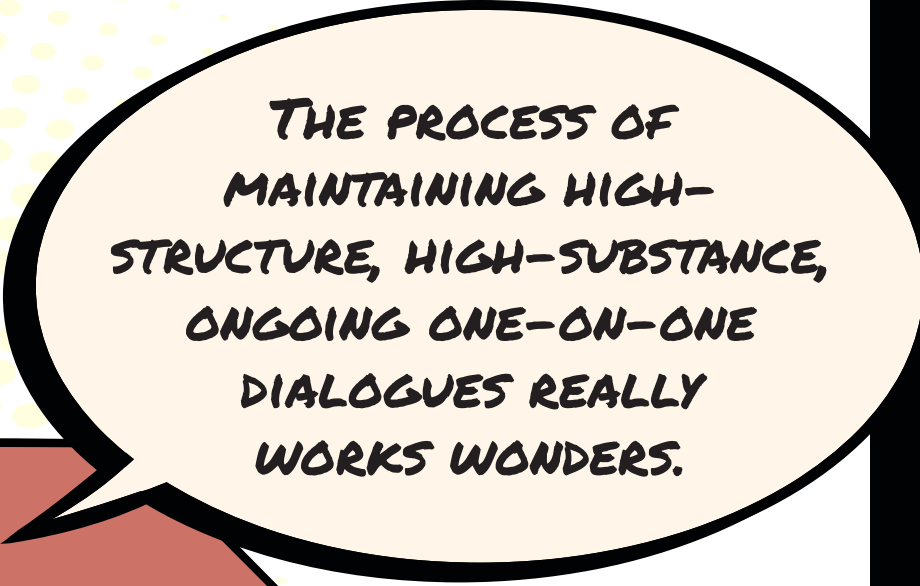
simple: intensive training in the fundamentals of leadership.

The process of maintaining high-structure, high-substance, ongoing one-on-one dialogue really works wonders. When managers consistently practice this technique, employees get the guidance, direction, feedback, troubleshooting, and coaching they need. And eight business results will follow:

- Fewer unnecessary problems occur.
- When problems do occur, managers are more likely to help their staff quickly solve them while they are still small and containable.
- Managers better plan resource use; therefore, they less often waste resources.
- Low performers are more likely to be held accountable.

- Productivity, quality, and morale typically improve among the majority of employees.
- Unplanned turnover decreases.
- Employees are more likely to follow established best practices and standard operating procedures, resulting in less rework.
- Managers are better able to delegate tasks, responsibilities, and projects to direct reports and, therefore, are less likely to perform lower-level tasks.

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**THE PROCESS OF
MAINTAINING HIGH-
STRUCTURE, HIGH-SUBSTANCE,
ONGOING ONE-ON-ONE
DIALOGUES REALLY
WORKS WONDERS.**

Be Social

Management is a social act; it occurs in conversations of all types—discussions, emails, texts, and gestures. Conversations are your currency for getting things done. As a manager, you are an engine for organizational results, and conversations are your fuel for making things happen. You can't manage in isolation.

Management is a social act and to be successful, you need to be a great conversationalist. But that doesn't mean chitchat or shooting the breeze or giving a TED Talk. While those are all good things to do when appropriate, they're not what I'm referring to when I suggest conversations are your engine fuel.

Let's break down the key words:

- social—relating to a society, a group of people who are together for a common purpose
- act—deliberate action, observable action, doing something
- conversation—messages sent and received between two or more people.

Being a great conversationalist in the workplace means that you help enable, facilitate, or initiate connections between people that help them move work forward. When you internalize and accept that management is a social act, it will change how you approach your work. This is a good thing.

SOURCE: LISA HANEBERG, *10 STEPS TO BE A SUCCESSFUL MANAGER*, 2ND EDITION, ATD PRESS, 2019



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