

The Activity Trap

“If only I had time to manage my staff...”

“I am too busy to spend time with my team.....”

“If only they would do things differently.....”

“It is just quicker if I do it my self.....”

Introduction

Most managers that we have encountered over the years use one or more of the above phrases in their daily working lives but this raises the question - when will it change? The pace of life in the business world seems to get faster, with ever increasing demands on our time, it is likely that if it bad now then this situation will only get worse!

Feeling more stressed now?

Don't be, there is a simple explanation and way to fix these problems - all it takes is managerial determination.

The managers we meet seem too busy to even stop and think, let alone to spend quality time with their team as they are caught in what we call the **Activity Trap**.

The Activity Trap means that managers end up “doing” tasks instead of developing their team to complete the tasks. As the managers get involved with more of the “doing” so they seem to get trapped into taking on even more tasks.

Solution

The solution is simple enough - **Stop Doing and Start Managing!**

It is the implementation of this statement that seems to be a little more difficult to achieve. To rectify the problem it is important to recognise the Activity Trap in the first place.

What is management?

We need to set the scene and understand what management means. At its core management is about achieving targets or goals within budget by developing people.

Good theory but..

..in the real world, sometime things just come up and managers now go through this thought process –

“The team is at maximum capacity at the moment and this thing is really important.....”

“As the manager, I must make sure that this issue is resolved.....”

“Jean should do this but it will take too long to explain it to her.....”

“Ben is not experienced enough yet,

“I’ll just get it done myself.....”

All these are seemingly good reasons for the manager to do the task but it is likely in business that this type of task will raise its head again, so when it does who is likely to end up doing it? After all, the manager has already established the route for an effective solution and everyone seems happy; The manager gets the issue resolved quickly and the staff members don’t have another item on their already full To-Do list.

This is part of the Activity Trap and it acts as a spiral because ownership of tasks seems to create more new ones. The manager is now spending more time on tasks which leaves less time for developing the team to take on those challenges in the future.

Over the fence Problems

Some managers fall into another trap which exacerbates the situation.

A staff member might highlight a problem that stops them achieving their objectives and so escalates the problem to the manager. The manager dutifully fixes that problem and again establishes that process for solving that sort of problem.

Example, Jean says complains that the IT department is not responding to requests for help and asks the manager for get involved. The manager contacts the IT department to see what is happening and sure enough the problem is more quickly resolved. Jean is happy because now she gets her PC fixed.

The real issue from a managerial point of view is that Jean is in no better position to solve the next IT problem but does know where to go to get it fixed – the manager did such a good job last time!!

Symptom or problem?

Another common contributor to the Activity Trap occurs when manager tackles the symptom and not the problem.

For example, the manager would like to ask Gerry to do some photocopying but is nervous because Gerry seems to be a little negative when asked to do photocopying. The last time Gerry just said he was too busy to do it right now so the manager did the photocopying as the job was urgent but suspected that Gerry was not that busy.

The manager fixed the symptom, the short term issue was solved and the photocopying was done but what will happen next time? It is likely that the manager will just do the photocopying again. What the manager should do is fix the real

problem that Gerry is either unaware that photocopying is his job or does not realise that his attitude towards the task causes problems. However this takes more time.

“Just” jobs

“Oh, I’ll just get the photo copying done, it only takes 5-6 mins” – These “just” jobs don’t seem significant on their own but they mount up when they occur on a daily basis.

There are approximately 20 days in a month so...

20 days X 6 minutes = 120 minutes or 2 hours per month.

12 months x 2 hours = 24 hours or 3 working days per year for a single “just” job

Imagine a discussion between the manager and the director “I won’t be managing the department for the first three days of this year because I thought I would get all my photocopying duties for the year out of the way!!”

Clearly this is nonsense however we all seem happy to do 5 minute “just” jobs!

Solving the Activity Trap

We can begin to see common traps that managers can fall into, so how do they break the Activity Trap when things still need doing?

Problems & solutions

A sales person is accountable for hitting targets by developing the client relationship, understanding needs and providing solutions but they are also they own the problems that stop them from achieving those targets such as competitive pressures, client problems and internal communications issues.

Consider a sales person, who is given products to sell that were half the price and twice the performance of the competition. How many sales people would we need? - certainly fewer.

The issue of problem ownership is true of all roles within organisations so the first step for the successful manager is to resist the desire to solve problems on behalf of their team but to ask the team member how they believe that this problem should be solved.

As the team members are closer to the detail, more often than not they know the right solution and so the manager merely needs to agree and review the outcome.

After two or three similar conversations, the staff member will begin to think about the solution before they call the manager and eventually will just fix future problems for themselves. If the manager really does have to fix the problem then at least the suggestion of the solution should come from the staff member which empowers them for next time.

My team is already too busy!

This is not the right way of thinking. The manager should prioritise tasks against the capacity of the team to complete those tasks.

Ideally the manager should set the goals of what needs achieving and encouraging the team to determine how they will be achieved.

My staff can't handle this yet

If a task comes in that needs urgent attention then it should be questioned in terms of its priority against all the other jobs and not thrown on the heap of "things to do"

If management is about achieving results by developing people then the key role of a manager is to monitor and review their staff so that the team are continually being developed towards the achievement of their goals.

This vital function is often one that is postponed or even cancelled because managers are already too busy with the activity trap, which is ironic because if the staff were more experienced, competent and empowered, they would be able to do the things that the manager is doing!

Monitoring and reviewing of the team members need to be scheduled in the diary and protected against the bombardments of unscheduled requests on the manager's time.

We recommend that a manager should spend one hour at least on a regular basis using a structured approach (see the Mdina Ability Measure) of uninterrupted quality time to discuss and review the staff member's performance.

It is by using this process that managers will develop the competence, responsibility and accountability in the team to help them achieving their goals.

As good practice managers should try to develop greater responsibility of trusted team members for succession planning.

Summary

There is only one person that can break the activity trap so if a manager wants to manage more and "do" less then here are some golden rules:-

- Recognise the Activity Trap
- Ask staff for solution to problems that they are accountable for solving
- Tackle root causes not skirt around problems
- Most issues reoccur so take time to get the process right with the right person solving the problem
- Monitor and review the team members as the number one priority in the management role