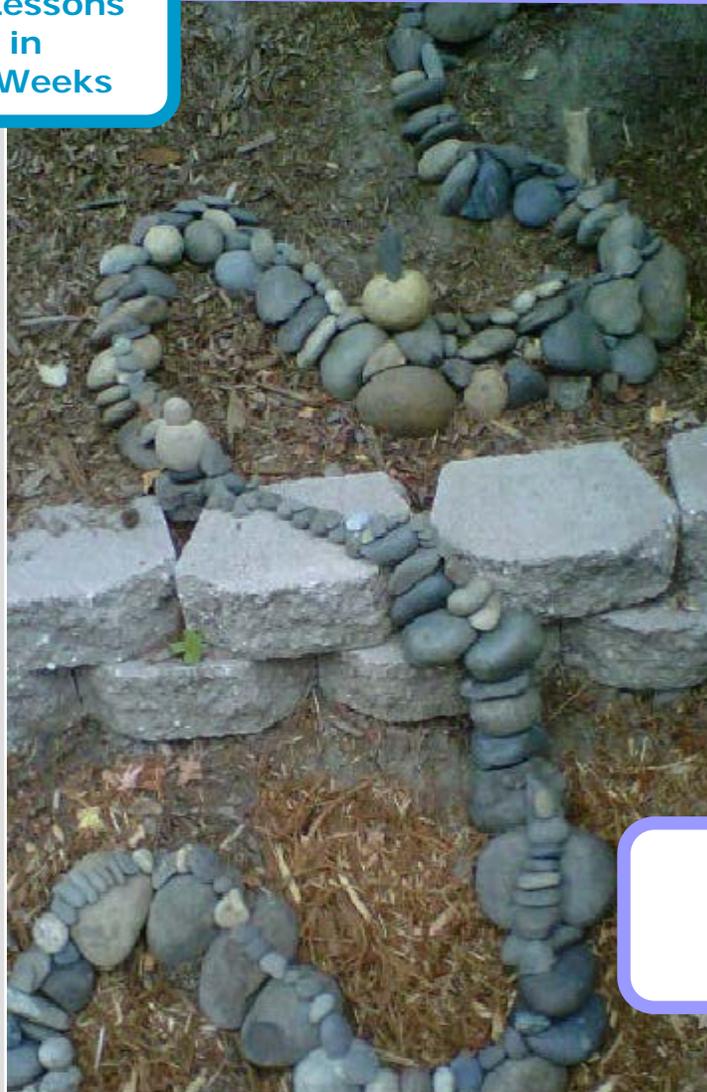


The Management 101 Handbook

A Team Primer

10 Lessons
in
10 Weeks



by
S. A. Robbins

How to transform your team in 50 days,
& still have time to do everything else.

Acknowledgements

Portions of this booklet previously appeared in the author's blog, [The System is a Mirror](#) (John Wiley & Sons, 2006), and as part of the "Strategically Speaking" series published by the [Office of the CIO](#).

The author thanks his "angel investors" who have provided support and encouragements, with special gratitude to Maggie Law for her infinite generosity and astute observations.

With appreciation to those who are reviewing early drafts and providing valuable critique: Rob Shearin, Kristi McGee, and John Niec.

*

This work is dedicated to my son, Max, for his devoted support during so many days & nights at the keyboard when he wondered why his dad didn't have a regular job like other people.

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This selection is from [The Management 101 Handbook](#),
to be published in late 2012.

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Executive Summary

This essay's premise is four-fold:

- 1) Unique among the many kinds of teams (sports, surgical, sales, advisory) are management teams; as dual citizens in their hierarchy (having a boss and also being one), these teams have a dynamic balance requiring constant attention;
- 2) Managers are rarely trained together, having gained their supervisory experience in different companies (sometimes different industries);
- 3) Many managers/directors have little formal training, promoted into management because of seniority, or subject-matter expertise;
- 4) Among experienced and successful managers, there is substantial benefit to be derived from having a common set of tools and a shared vocabulary with their colleagues.

Teambuilding at the management level requires more than a camping expedition or a ropes course (both of which have different benefits, if/when done well). Training at the management level requires efficiency and immediate value because of their constrained schedules, divided attentions, and layered commitments.

An artful combination of training and teambuilding is proposed, a working curriculum in which "lab exercises" are embedded an actual work agenda, binding the team together by means of a shared training experience that is woven into the fabric of their week. It is a framework for team alignment based upon the group's interactions, and anchored in their daily work.

This framework can be implemented by leader-led coaching, or facilitated by an organizational consultant. The goal of these facilitated conversations is the team's transformation from a gathering of strong-willed individuals with diverse levels of experience into a management *team* with a shared toolbox.

Introduction

Success is all about growing others.
- Jack Welch

Something's wrong in the modern, fast-as-possible, revenue-is-everything business environment, and industry journalists have recently identified the root cause.

From InformationWeek's Rob Preston (<http://tiny.cc/ytcdbw>):

If "people are our most important resource," as employers are wont to proclaim, why do most of them expect this precious asset to show up gift wrapped on day one, and to increase in value with little effort on their part?...Something's wrong here, and it has nothing to do with a skills shortage.

CIO Magazine's Martha Heller goes further (<http://tinyurl.com/cddjtz9>):

Like it or not, we are in the midst of yet another technology talent crisis, and when your CEO is demanding more out of your team, you really need good people. But here's the paradox: The talent pipeline is

being squeezed...you'd be better off making the most of the team you have.

Given the improbability of hiring reliable leadership, we need to train our managers and directors to do a better job, and yet, there is a paucity of consistent management training in an industry that cherishes technical skills but is confounded by the inability of supervisors to adequately manage their most valued technologists.

Though some of us have benefited from an association with management excellence in our careers and have learned by modeling those behaviors, the great majority of managers stumble through their crisis-ridden workdays, wondering (sometimes aloud) why projects or schedules or system upgrades go so stunningly awry.

Example

One engineering manager, a ten-year management veteran and recent coaching client, confided, "I've never been coached, not once."

Further investigation with his overworked HR staff confirmed the manager's lament, and his supervising director sidestepped responsibility by admitting he had never been trained, either. "We learn by making mistakes and hopefully not repeating them," he said unapologetically. "Who has the time or the money for training?"

A common annoyance for many executives: inadequate middle managers who were once very successful individuals but, once promoted to management, are now perceived as under-performers.

“They didn’t rise to the occasion,” or “they’re in way over their head”, or “they simply aren’t meeting corporate expectations.”

The reasons for a lack of training are many, and quite real: budget and time constraints, understaffed HR departments, a focus upon revenue and cost reduction over career development (as if team leadership is only a minor contributor to operational success).¹ But there are also a few myths that deserve exposition.

Myth #1: Training is less important than on-the-job experience.

Executive reluctance to insist upon formal management training, however, seems to be a quiet reluctance, a kind of blindness (denial) among those same executives, few having been trained during their careers. Instead, management techniques were learned by observing others; to approve the request for management training would be tantamount to an admission of his/her own inadequate background.

It should be noted that the upward trajectory of any individual executive’s career path is a result of that individual’s capacity to shine.

Cream, as they used to say, rises to the top.

¹Two additional reasons for executive interaction (paraphrased from actual statements) as stunning as they are small-minded: “We shouldn’t spend any money giving people skills that they will use to get other jobs in other companies...” and “To agree that training is important will undermine the reputations of our executives, because they haven’t been trained, and that would be bad for employee morale...”

There is value, to be sure, in the accumulation of leadership strengths in an individual's struggle to achieve. The survive-to-succeed paradigm is often valuable for individuals in many kinds of businesses, and this should not be confused with a train-for-success approach for management teams – because teams progress in different development stages than individuals. As such, a different kind of training is needed for the *team* to achieve.

Myth #2: Management training is expensive and time-consuming.

As with any professional discipline, expertise is harvested over time. It can be augmented by the wide array of graduate business schools and certifications – at the MBA level or by means of various “boot camps” sponsored by those schools – but it can be expensive. (In some ways, corporate America has outsourced employee training to these programs). Yet, there are basic management practices that should be available to your management team *in house*, as part of their work week. This approach needs little budget, and can be completed without a forced delay of other (i.e., more important) projects.

Myth #3: We already know this stuff.

Here's a quick quiz:

1. Can you name the 3 basic decision-making models, and when each is most appropriate?
2. Can you explain the difference between conflict resolution and problem resolution?
3. Do you know which business discipline was born of necessity in the shipyards during World War II?

Knowing the answers does not guarantee success at the management level; facts can be memorized. “The Quiz” modestly and efficiently demonstrates that we can all learn, and improve.

In fact, one of the worst impediments to that improvement is the Smartest-Guy-In-The-Room syndrome, a psychological disorder that can turn brains to mush. I've met quite a few senior managers and directors who claimed to "know this stuff." And yet, when asked The Quiz, they slumped in their fancy chairs.

The goal of this essay is not to "out" the untrained managers in our midst, nor is it to force a truth (about our current capability) where that truth is unwelcome.

Our target is the management team *as an entity* – each of the forthcoming lessons is aimed at the *team*. The values to be derived are less concerned with any individual's growth and operational maturity than they are concerned with improving the *team's* overall capabilities.

Myth #4: Techies just aren't good at "the people stuff."

Human behavior isn't easy to understand. Some teams click, others don't. However, our avoidance of the subject makes the challenge seem more daunting than it needs to be.

As parents, we insist that our teens take lessons before giving them the keys to the family car, and the DMV will test them again when they are 60.

Music teachers force us to practice the scales, not as punishment but as an ordinary path toward the extraordinary.

In short, we know and reinforce the value of practiced proficiency in our homes and our lives, yet, at work – when managers and their teams begin to struggle, we're more inclined to ignore them, or discipline them (or replace them) than to give them a set of tools to turn things around.

Myth #5: Good teams don't need exceptional managers; they just need us to stay out of their way.

This is the quintessential rationalization of leaders who don't understand the reasons why good teams excel while others (composed of equally talented individuals) never meet expectations. Well-managed teams perform well, and consistently, if they have a coaching staff that knows how to take them to the next level. Even an All-Star team will benefit from a coherent management methodology.

For the purposes of this essay, "coherent" management is defined as a set of shared practices within an organization, reinforced over time.

Management methods can certainly vary between experienced managers and directors who, in the vacuum, have established their own approaches. While this is preferable to the absence of any recognizable leadership methodology, it is less reliable over time (evaporates) or wears down from resistance (friction). When an organization shares a common vocabulary, and a common set of agreed-upon behaviors (i.e., a constitution governing the regular "business of the day") teams consistently perform at an optimal level.

For any organized group tasked with important work, management training is neither a luxury nor an unreachable objective. With a basic set of shared practices, individual managers learn to govern themselves. Each business and IT leader must, therefore, ensure a coherent management framework within which their managers can operate consistently, and without friction, to ensure that their entire organization has the tools it needs to be successful.

15 year-old students are given a Driver's Handbook.

17 year-old grocery clerks understand prioritization when they re-arrange cereal boxes for maximum sales.

Even young Little League umpires are matched with a volunteer mentor in their first season wearing blue.

And yet, we're likely to promote our most senior technologist (whether or not they aspire toward management) to leadership positions on the assumption that peer respect can alchemically transform new managers into sound business decision-makers. And we wonder why so many projects are late, so many products have bugs, and so many startups fail within 24 months.

As with any profession, management in a technology environment has a set of skills (i.e., learned behaviors) and our literature is replete with lists and guides and handbooks that go largely unread because every new manager is thrown into the fray without time to learn, even if they are motivated/ inclined to do so.

I suppose it shouldn't surprise me that a country in which the quality of public education is at an all-time low, and in a state (California, for those readers elsewhere) in which education funding has been dramatically reduced for twenty years, businesses also reflect this short-sighted perspective. But as Rob Preston scolded (*InformationWeek*), there is something quite wrong with this disregard for training (at all levels). It has nothing to do with a skills shortage.

As industry leaders, we should be embarrassed into action.

About the Author

Stuart Robbins has twenty-five years of technology management experience with an exceptional record of problem resolution, team & organizational improvement, leadership and architectural acumen. He's well known for innovative solutions to complex problems, analytical discourse, and consistently high standards for communication, integrity, and thought leadership.

His executive background includes responsibilities as a Chief Information Officer (twice), with senior IT management roles in the semi-conductor, knowledge management, and HRIS industries including a decade of experience with SaaS/Cloud architectures. His consulting clientele includes The World Bank Group, The Federal CIO Council, Documentum, Cisco Systems, Symantec, Adobe Systems, Ziff Davis Media, Rambus Technologies, & TechSoup.

A certified Project Manager (ISM 1997) with a Master's Degree in Writing, Stuart is widely published on the topics of organizational change, knowledge management, and software development. He is the author of the widely-praised book The System is a Mirror (John Wiley & Sons, 2006). See the next page for a full list of Stuart's publications.

Areas of Expertise – Management Coach, Project Turnarounds, Team and Process Improvement, Due Diligence for M&A activities, IT Governance, problem project evaluation and turnaround strategies, IT re-organization methodology.

Industry Verticals – High Tech, Software development and distribution, Public sector systems, Finance/payroll/benefits, and numerous non-profit organizations.

Brief Background

C-Level Advisor - As Executive Director of The CIO Collective (1998-2008), Stuart advised a broad constituency that included The Federal CIO Council, Credit Suisse First Boston, Bessemer Trust (NY) and numerous startups and venture capital firms.

Interim IT Management – Served as consulting CIO for Jamcracker during their growth from 30 to 360 employees, and most recently, interim CIO for TriNet HR, Inc. during their merger integration cycle with Florida-based Gevity.

Organizational Assessment – Nicknamed a "corporate whisperer" for his ability to change team/department dynamics behind the scenes, Stuart has consistently guided IT organizations through transformational initiatives. Beginning with a formal (multi-style) audit of team and individual capabilities vs. performance, these audits deliver quantifiable improvements and roadmap for on-going organizational growth.

Past employers: Valid Logic Systems, Cadence Design Systems, Synopsys, and most recently, TriNet HR, Inc.

Education – BA from Oberlin College, MFA from Warren Wilson College; currently, a Teaching Consultant at Hult International Business School in San Francisco.

Professional Publications

Coherent IT Management: Why Don't We Train Our Managers? published by The Office of the CIO, June 2012.

SDLC: A Primer, CIO Wisdom, Volume III, John Wiley & Sons, November 2011.

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Editorial: *A Call to Action*. CIO Insight, September 2001.

White paper: *The Changing Face of IT: Net-based Economics and the New CIO* for Jamcracker, July 2000.

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Through the Information Looking-Glass, Communications of the ACM, 1995.

Creative Publications

Stuart's work has also appeared in Amazing Stories, Having Been There (ed. Alan Luks), William Saroyan (ed. Leo Hamalian), *Pocket Pal Press*, *Poetry NOW*, *Berkeley Poet's Cooperative*, *The American Poetry Anthology*, *Ararat*, *The Jewish Ledger*, *Aiki-News*, *The Baseball Bard*, and forthcoming from *Deus Loci* (Lawrence Durrell Society).

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