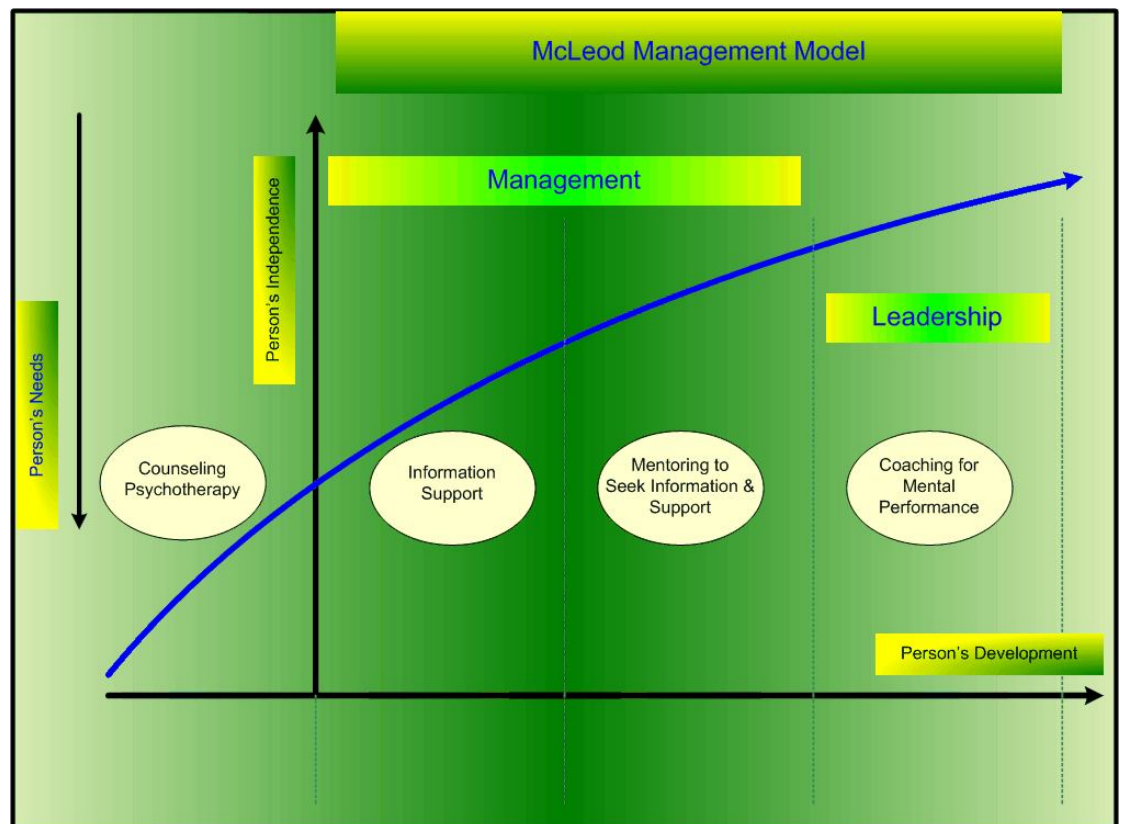


Managing & Leading People

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People need different managing styles if they are to be effective in the longer term and to have an improved sense of well-being at work. This article sets out a simple methodology for knowing how to manage individuals at any one time and prevent the curse of over-managing and under-managing.

The model which has been in use for about a year is shown in the figure. The vertical axis is based upon the level of 'independence' of the person being managed (whether direct report or dotted-line, matrix). The horizontal scale shows a developmental curve from the left, Stage One to the highest, Stage Three, right set apart by dotted vertical lines. For completeness, I include an off-chart Stage Zero for which additional help and support is normally required, that is, a person who is not capable of effective work without specialist support.



Independence

A person is independent when their needs for information and support are minimal. They are capable of doing the work and self-resource themselves to satisfy their needs for information and support in most situations.

At every Stage, no decision is made about the way to manage, but rather it provides clues to the sort of conversation we will have to determine the best way forward, for that individual, in that context: Perceive – Test - Action.

As with the Situational Leadership model¹, it is important to know that in Stages One through Three, a single person may be at any Stage in one context at work and at another Stage in a different context at work – each requiring different things from us. Let's define some terms.

Information

Information is the data, knowledge, people-networks, how-we-do-things, boundaries and experience that we need to achieve most perfectly at our jobs.

Support

Support takes a number of forms. These can include recognition, acknowledgement, offering to assist, offering to facilitate, providing resources, boosting confidence and commitment through success or failure.

Mentoring

If someone knows nothing, then we simply need to tell them what to do, provide lists of actions and know-how. Mentoring adds to this since it can involve direct information and widens the input of information to include examples and stories – to offer new ways of thinking, new choices. One can go further, where an individual is independent enough, questions can be used to encourage them to find new perceptions, new choices and motivated actions.

All of these can be linked:

Tom, I can think of three options we might use here and these are <gives details, 1,2,3>. There may be at least one more I haven't thought of. Would you like to think of other options and then discuss the pros and cons of each?

¹ Ken Blanchard

Tom, I had a similar problem some years ago and at the time came up with an idea. This was <gives detail>. In addition, I can think of another two options <gives details A,B>. Do any of these give you ideas for what to do now or is there a better way?

The process provides information to a novice in a culture to understand what and how things are done within the culture and encourages independent thinking so they may need less of your management time in the months to come. There is a good reason for providing ideas and solutions in threes². The reason behind this is simple. Where you offer one solution, they will typically accept or reject it without further processing. The decision is a simple 'yes' or 'no' based upon their current thinking.

Our minds are adapted to comparing. The yes/no tends to stimulate that simple process. When they are given three solutions, it become more complicated. With three solutions, several concurrent comparing steps are needed:

A or B
B or C
A or C

As the comparing begins, they typically give up the comparing process and start to do higher-level processing. Once this happens, it is more likely that they will introduce ideas of their own based upon their own experiences. The result is likely to be a new idea, previously inaccessible them.

Facilitation

This term is applied to methods of drawing out the latent potential and knowledge in people whether in 1-2-1 or in groups. In this case information is not normally provided, the premise is that the solution needed can be developed by questioning and by their self-reflection. This can be neatly illustrated by considering the process of coaching which is typically facilitation on a 1-2-1 basis.

Coaching

Coaching is a facilitation process dominated by three 'Principle Instruments', these are Questions, Challenge and Silence.

Questions

² McLeod, 2004. Performance Coaching & Mentoring in Organisations, Resource, 1,1, 28-31

Questions have many purposes. Typically at the early stages of an issue or goal-development, we use questions to develop perception and choice. Questions include:

*What other options are there?
And if there was another option, what is that option now?
And if I had this same challenge, how would you advise me now?
Imagine you are an observer in that situation, what is happening?*

These are all open questions³ in that the answers require detail. Later, we may ask questions to get to a single plan of action:

Which of your ideas will work best for you and the department?

After that we will want to test their motivation and be sure that the plan of action is holistically sound and realistic. Again, questions are used:

What are the pros and cons of those options?

How would that be for you if you did not succeed?

What other resources are needed to achieve that?

If there is another implication we missed, what is that?

And if that does mean more work, what about your private life?

When they are fairly certain and committed to a course of action, it is then useful to use questions again in order to invite them to spin the clock forward or 'future-pace':

Imagine it's all done, you have the award, what is that like now?

Challenge

Whereas questions may invite a new perspective or action, challenges are more pushing than pulling in nature.

Challenges can be statements or questions and are designed to shift perception another level. Challenge can only be made where there is already a very good, working level of rapport and a willingness (on their part) to be pushed further into the Stretch Zone. Remember that the Stretch Zone is also called the Learning Zone. It is from this Zone that new perceptions and ideas will spring.

Who says you are hopeless?

³ All these questions also fall into other categories as well as 'open'. The opposite type, closed questions, are ones that can be answered by the words yes or no or a numeral.

Is that slightly hopeless or completely hopeless?

What would someone else need to think and do in order to be that scared?

Not very good at presentation? I have never seen you present but let's agree that you are really terrible at presenting and move on to the next item.

The more challenging statements only work if the rapport is excellent. Of course you risk rapport every time you push a person into the Stretch Zone but that must not deter you.

Silence

'Learn to be quiet enough to hear the sound of the genuine within yourself so that you can hear it in others'

Mariam Wright Edelman

'Let us honor silence, the perennial flow of language interrupted by words'

M. Ryan

In coaching, the most profound perceptions and motivations arise because the coachee has been able to self-reflect (without an interruption from their coach/leader). These silences can run for several minutes but the coachee is never aware of that time span because their focus is wholly internal. The self-reflective silence may create a novel solution, great certainty, massive motivation, a great feeling of stupidity for not having thought of the solution before and/or an overwhelming desire to start on their plan instantly. In other words, the most extraordinary convictions and energy arise directly from careful questioning and a silent space in which to self-reflect.

The coaching-leader therefore needs a number of key skills to work at this level of performance. These skills include questioning skills, rapport-building skills and knowing when to stay silent.

The ability to hold that silent space is one that needs practice and confidence to achieve. We run courses to do just that⁴ – looking at the power of silence specifically but also, naturally, to develop all the skills of coaching-leaders.

To begin with, notice these two things:

1. Where there is a silence and you have an urge to break it

⁴ The Power of Silence, first designed and delivered with Steve Breibart

2. When you ask a question and a silence follows

If you have discomfort with silence then it is worthwhile giving yourself permission to stay with silence and practice by leaving longer silent spaces in conversations. If a person is busy thinking through an answer to your question then force yourself to be quiet and observe the effect of that.

Silence is enormously powerful. It can be used to help people talk themselves into uncomfortable reality, for example, that they alone are responsible for some event that went badly. Silence is also powerful when used just prior to speaking at meetings – the more confident and impressive you are, the longer you can hold that silence. This increases your status in the perception of others⁵.

Working with the McLeod Management Model

When we manage, it is more important to understand the best way we might manage rather than be able to label someone. For that reason, I concentrate on the differences between the Stages. Noticing those differences then help you to have productive conversations with the individual so that your response is optimal for their performance. This is flexible managing at its best and will avoid under-managing and over-managing.

Stage Zero to Stage One

The differential between Stage Zero and Stage One is determined by the emotional resource of the person to do their job rather than by their competences. Competence will help people in both levels to gain self-esteem and self-confidence. However, at Stage Zero the individual is too distracted, too panicky and/or too preoccupied to learn quickly enough and to achieve a consistent level of quality. I have taken Stage Zero off to the left of the main chart because most managers are not qualified to deal with such issues even if they have the time to grapple with the situation.

Stage Zero people have a lack of emotional resource. In its extreme manifestations, this lack of emotional resource can appear as crying, absenteeism and self-harming. In these cases, it is worth considering having a conversation about further help and involving a professional from the HR department, possibly of the same gender as the person exhibiting those symptoms.

A conversation will be measured in time and the manager must always be prepared to go over the same ground several times if necessary. In stress, people may hear but not understand what is being said due to inner-dialogue, self-judgment, interpretation and so forth. When repeating information, keep the messages simple and clear.

⁵ This is an area of expertise of John Abulafia the operatic director and trainer.

The conversation will best be conducted in a neutral and familiar space. Ideally they will have options where they can sit without any desk or table between them and you. Make sure there can be no interruptions and that phones are turned off.

Tom, I am concerned about you because you seem to be struggling. Because we care about you and not just your work, I have asked you to meet with me so we can talk confidentially about any pressing concerns and issues that you may have. Where we can, I would like us to agree a way forward that will help you to feel confident and competent in your work. To start, would you like to tell me what you believe I have said so far so that we are starting on the same page?

Asking for clarity is essential. If Tom has gone internal, he will have missed most of what has been said, critically, the part about working together to help him.

Where the emotional situation seems less debilitating it may be possible to have a conversation about some training or 1-2-1 mentoring (from an encouraging colleague) to get their confidence back. An egalitarian space, a choice of identical chairs, absence of blockage (table or desk) are all helpful. The pace of delivery should be measured and your attention should be good so you can observe reactions and gain insight into whether or not they really understand what you are saying.

Tom, you seem to be struggling sometimes and I realize that I may have expected too much of you too soon. I want us to talk together so we can both agree a way forward that will get you moving forward and feeling more confident in your work. To start, would you like to tell me what you understand I have said so we are starting on the same page.

And later:

Tom, there may be some options for assisting you to get up to speed faster and I hope that one of them may appeal to you. I am wondering if Joanne or Peter might spend an hour with you for a couple of mornings to offer advice and show you how they do things. Alternatively, you could shadow one of them for a half-day. There is a training course on quality management coming up in two months and I want to put your name down for that as well - how do you feel about these three options?

In contrast, Stage One people do have the emotional resource to improve but need support and information to do that. Not all people at this level will realize they need help however – a conversation in all cases makes that explicit. Three things count:

1. asking them for their understanding of what you have said

2. asking whether they agree they are in need and thirdly, if helpful,
3. using silence to get that agreement.

Remember that you may have misdiagnosed Stage Zero and Stage One. The person that you thought was Stage One may get upset and their fears, lack of self-confidence etcetera may come spilling out. For that reason, it is still best to make sure that the space is not-overlooked, that you have privacy and that interruptions are not possible.

Tom, thank you for coming in. I would like you to feel positive about this meeting because its purpose is simply to do our best to advance your working effectiveness and help you feel more confidence as harder projects and more work-load come your way. To begin with I would like to be sure we are both on the same page so could you tell me what you understand I have asked you here for now?

If any correction is needed to Tom's interpretation, you can give it – use the same phrases as before to make it easier and again ask for his interpretation of what you have said.

Tom, I want to tell you that I am pleased with your time-keeping and enthusiasm. I also want to talk with you about some working practices that fall short of our requirements in the department – I mean specifically the accuracy of filing and the speed at which files are returned so others can access them quickly. Do you want to tell me what is working and not working for both those issues, I mean the accuracy and the speed of filing?

The speech contains positives and inclusive language ('I also want to talk with you'), is clear and specific but inviting rather than ordering. If Tom does not agree that there is performance issue then resort to specifics and use silence to ensure you get an answer:

Tom, if I heard you right, you disagree that files are being put back incorrectly by you. Here I have five records from three of your colleagues, both the time of your call and your notes in the files are prior to theirs in each case. What do you have to say about that?

Keep the silence unless Tom starts to fidget or to look around the room. We are so used to speech that the silence may be difficult to manage but you must. A minute, even three, four or more may be required to get Tom to do the self-awareness work internally and be able to admit his errors. If you butt-in or argue, all you will achieve is argument. The problem is internal to him and he will not sort that out by arguing his case, only by self-reflection. If he starts to look bored or begins to fidget, ask the question again exactly as you did

before. The sentence will hit exactly the same processing area in his brain and no re-interpretation will be required⁶.

Typically a question like this only needs to be asked once, occasionally twice to get a sensible answer where any amount of argument and denial would have failed.

Angus, I am sorry. I've always struggled with words. I mean, does The Ford Group go under 'T' for The or 'F' for Ford. And what about the Robert Thomas Company? Is that R or T? I thought I put it under Thomas – is that wrong?

Again, the manager will want to gain a mutual agreement about the way forward.

Okay Tom, I could get a print off of all the names in file-order and yes you are right about the difficulties. In the telephone book I have seen the Robert Thomas Company listed under the surname but we list by the first letter of the company name, that's 'R' for Robert'. The list will be useful though as some companies are better known by a brand and that may be at the top of their correspondence, even though we list by company name. An example is 'Whizzo' which is manufactured by the Reading Chemical Company and hence listed under 'R' for Reading. Will that be enough to get you back on track or do you need any other help with this?

When faced with Stage One, we need to be specific about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done and not offer choices. Choices are only likely to confuse at this time as the consequences of each choice is unlikely to be understood

Stage 1 to Stage Two

The boundary between Stage One and Stage Two is demarked by a general change in the level of independent working. At Stage One these are largely below professional standards, at Stage Two they are largely to acceptable levels. There may still be issues about speed, quality or the understanding of the consequences of actions but the base level of work is adequate and advancing. At Stage Two we can begin to test the person to think solutions through in the areas where they are most experienced. One way to do that is to ask mentoring-type questions.

Tom, the Financial Report for Category D purchasing is fine. I want you to look at the circulation list and tell me if you notice anyone that is there that ought not to be listed or whether anyone is not listed that ought to be – any thoughts?

⁶ This comes from understanding about brain function and specifically neural pathways supported by what we know from the use of Clean Language (David Grove) and Symbolic Modeling (Tompkins & Lawley)

Possibly followed by:

Excellent. Now, what do we normally do in a situation like this?

If Tom does not know the system, you can intervene:

Tom, there are at least three ways that might work. The others went yesterday by internal mail right?... okay, we could mail the others with a note from me or you; we could email the report similarly so it catches up, or since all the people we missed have offices that are on site, we could get Jonathon to walk them around by hand with a note. Which do you think would be most appropriate and why?

The questions are only asked if an assumption can reasonably be made that the individual has some level of understanding in that context, if not, we should consider them as Stage One and ask what information-needs they may have. The answer to that should be sufficient to enable them to complete the job. We can always test for clarity with another question.

Stage Two to Stage Three

Stage Two to Stage Three is demarked by a higher level of independence. At Stage Three the person is self-starting and more resourceful. Stage Three people are taking new initiatives and finding, from experience, better ways of doing things. The real development that awaits them is mental aptitude. By that, I mean the development of higher reasoning, wider and more holistic understanding of the consequences of actions, broader ability in initiating and developing relationships (to improve performance) and careful and sensitive handling of both communication and management issues. All of these are stimulated most excellently by facilitating their development using coaching interventions to make the difference.

Coaching assumes that they have the mental resources to find motivated solutions for themselves and enough information about the detail of their specialty, the role of their product or service and their impact within the whole business. Using a combination of questions, challenges and silence, the coaching-leader aims to encourage the person to achieve their goal, gain a wider set of options for moving forward and select one that is effective (and for which the person is suited and motivated).

For more about coaching in management, please refer to 'Performance Coaching – The Handbook for Managers, HR Professionals and Coaches'⁷. Here though are some typical coaching interventions:

Tom, you say that that we cannot produce the order in time, but what if we could? What would we have to do in order to do that?

⁷ McLeod, A., 2003

Tom, if I heard you right you said that Peters dislikes you because he has twice left you off the monthly meeting list. If there was another reason for that, what might that reason be?

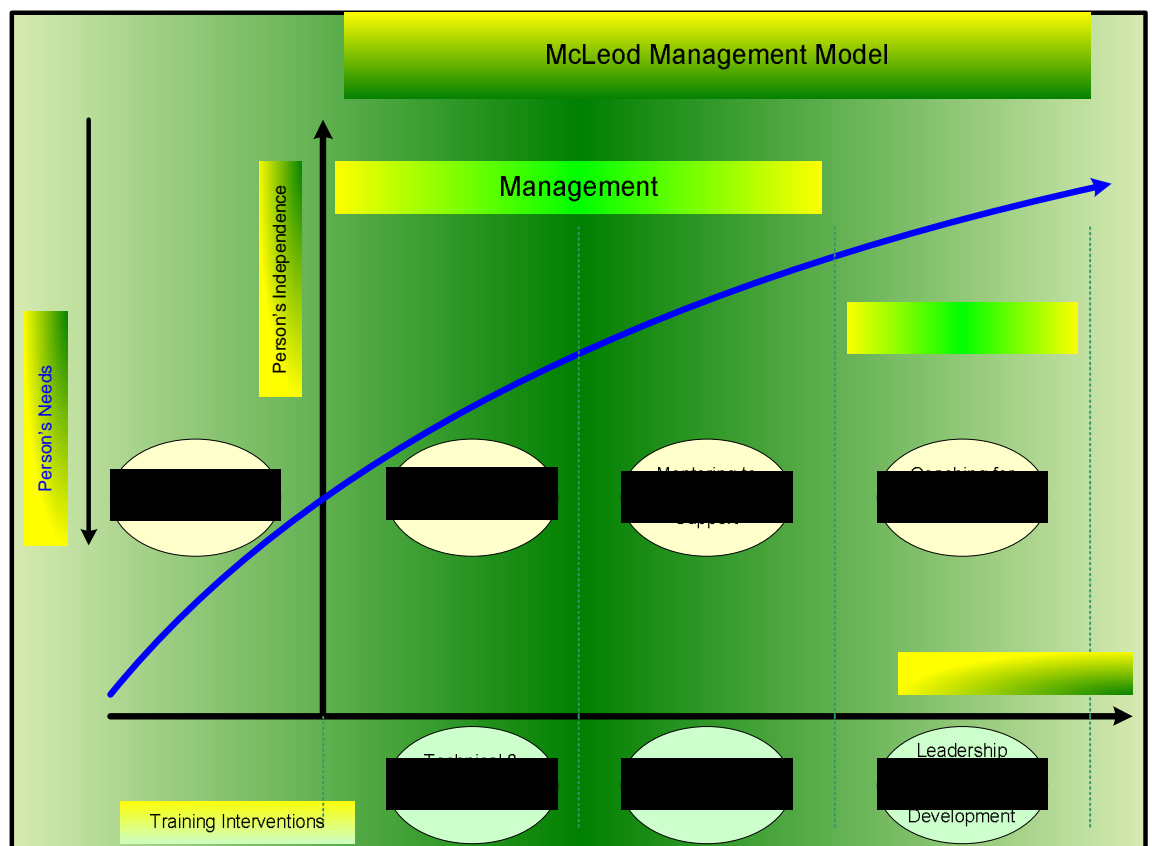
Tom, you have suggested three different approaches. Which one is the best and why?

Tom, should we concentrate on what we know we can't do or what we can?

Tom, imagine if you will that John had this same issue going on with him at the moment. What could you advise him to do?

Tom, What if we had just won the Annual Award, how good would we be feeling right now? What do you think we would have learned that would be useful to us in order to achieve this award again?

Each question is designed to test Tom's present perception and move him to a more useful, performance mindset. More than that, professional coaching develops mental agility and expert use of tools that Tom will apply long after Tom or the coach (or coaching-leader) has moved jobs.



In the figure above I include relevant training interventions corresponding to each level, for completeness.

Conclusion

Over and under-managing are massively de-motivating. This model seeks to enable any manager to make a rapid assessment of where an individual may be in the model and then to ask questions to check that their view is right. If in doubt, and unless there is an urgent event going on, it is probably best to start with questions and if the individual is struggling to understand you, provide more information and context to help them. This whole process of questioning is adapted from coaching and mentoring skills. The aim of the process in all cases is to help the individual to develop their 'doing' and 'mental' skills to higher levels. Not only is this good for the organization but it also frees up time for other tasks when our people become more effectively independent from us.

This article is an adaptation from Dr McLeod's latest book 'Self-coaching Leadership – Fast Strategies from Manager to Leader' published in May 2007 by John Wiley & Sons, Chichester; ISBN: 978-0-470-51280-7. He is also author of 'Me, Myself, My Team' and 'Performance Coaching – The Handbook for Managers, HR Professionals and Coaches' both published by Crown House, Carmathen & NY. He can be contacted via the website www.angusmcleod.com or by sending an email to ourinfo@angusmcleod.com