

# THE MANAGER AS CHOREOGRAPHER

## *FROM “DOER” TO “DELEGATOR”*

Over the course of a career, a ballet dancer will have dedicated literally, tens of thousands of hours practising and performing leaps, jumps, lifts, scales, whirls, and pirouettes. Eventually, the body succumbs to the compounding and debilitating effect of injuries, pain and fatigue. The dancer is forced into retirement and moves on to establish a second career. In this career transition, many dancers will use their knowledge and experience to teach young aspiring ballet dancers, whereas some others might become choreographers.

As a choreographer, the former ballet dancer must evolve from a *performing* mode to a *directing and influencing* mode – getting other dancers to execute the ballet in a particular manner. The choreographer dreams the ballet and sees every motion and movement as frozen frames. The choreographer needs to articulate this imagination with sufficient scope, detail and texture, in order that the entire ensemble shares a common understanding and interpretation, thereby delivering a harmonious presentation. The choreographer builds upon this process of illumination, by patiently and persistently coaching the ballet dancers to achieve the desired performance.

Managers are somewhat like this image of a dancer-turned-choreographer. Their role is to lead their team to a desired level of performance. They do this by:

- ◆ setting goals and planning activities,
- ◆ securing the necessary resources,
- ◆ defining expectations and establishing consequences,
- ◆ training and coaching to enhance skills and competencies,
- ◆ describing and modelling appropriate behaviours, and
- ◆ providing the requisite supporting environment.

This can be a daunting task, especially for the new supervisor or manager. A better understanding of what might constrain a new manager will help to establish a foundation for enhancing their effectiveness.

Let's deconstruct the usual chain of events. Generally, we take an outstanding performer on a Friday and make them a new supervisor or manager on Monday. I'm always intrigued with what transpired over the weekend. Did they catch some “*magic dust*” and suddenly experience deep insight into what it means to be a manager? Most likely, they did a little celebrating about the promotion. That's all.



As a new manager, how are they supposed to know what to do? What their new role requires and how to manage employees, some of whom may be close friends, in what is now a reporting relationship? How is the manager supported in this transition by the organization? Far too often, not very well. We seem to have a proud tradition of stranding people in new roles without training or coaching them. So the manager essentially is abandoned – left on her/his own to *sink or swim*.

Immersed in a new portfolio and consumed with a myriad of unfamiliar demands, the manager struggles to establish order and achieve results. The manager seeks performance from the team, but suffers from lack of expertise in directing staff and assigning tasks, resulting in ever-increasing frustration and stress. In some instances, the manager's behaviour will become erratic, as feelings of inadequacy and loss of control are magnified.

Against this backdrop, the manager may default to the familiarity and comfort of what they know well and become *task focused*. They take on the work that their staff should be performing and, in turn, the staff becomes marginalized and demoralized. Allowed to continue, the outcome is that we lose a good performer and gain a lousy manager.

In the case of the choreographer, the body is so worn out that it prohibits a return to actually performing the ballet. The manager, similarly, needs to impose a metaphorical restriction on her/himself in terms of resorting back to fulfilling tasks that should be performed by the staff. To evolve from *doer* to *delegator*, the manager will require personal discipline and organizational reinforcement and support.

The first step in this maturation is thoughtful consideration of their new role. Having been so task focused, the new manager often is inclined to see their responsibility simply as accomplishing many more tasks. Even though at first it may appear counter-intuitive, their true function is fundamentally different.

The manager needs to achieve the desired outcomes by working *through* people. S/he needs to orchestrate the actions and performance of the staff. The paramount objective, therefore, becomes a focused approach to developing their people. Tasks get accomplished and goals are achieved by getting people to perform.

Just as the choreographer needed to envision the ballet in order to coach the ensemble to achieve the desired performance, it is essential that the manager first scopes-out the objectives for the portfolio, the expected deliverables and a plan of action to guide the staff. The objectives, deliverables and action plan become the framework for ongoing discussions with staff. In this way, the manager establishes a series of goals and activities that are consistent and in alignment.



For instance, it is unreasonable to hold an expectation for a standard of performance from someone who is not competent in undertaking the assignment. The manager, therefore, needs to assess and confirm the skills and competencies of the staff. Where there are gaps, training interventions are warranted. The manager also must provide consistent coaching to support employees in their development. Fulfilment of these pre-conditions must be verified, before the manager can delegate responsibilities to the staff.

Most managers struggle with delegating tasks and assignments. Very clear and explicit communication is required to establish goals, expectations, standards, and operating procedures. This takes time and attention, particularly when the employee is new to the task. The manager needs to be deliberate and methodical in this process of delegation. (See also the article, “The Art of Delegating”.)

As the manager makes the difficult transition from *doer* to *delegator*, new dimensions of experiences become available. The manager, no longer being task focused, develops a broadened and enriched perspective. In this process, they learn to appreciate much more the integrative nature of work. They derive satisfaction and fulfilment from helping their staff to develop greater competencies and to assume ever-greater responsibilities.

With the development of competent staff, the workload can be shared more equitably; resulting in significantly enhanced overall performance. The manager will have more time available for reflection and planning, all the while co-ordinating the activities of the staff. And like the seasoned choreographer, the effective manager also will be able to delight in enjoying the performance of others in this grand ballet.

## Afterthought

If upon reflection, you feel that you’re not the expert choreographer that you want to be or are frustrated by the performance of your managers, perhaps we should chat.

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