

Technician to Senior Executive - What?? How??

When I was young I often thought that age and experience were criteria that older people enjoyed using to delay the justified promotion of younger people. Now that I am older I realize that age and experience really do count if one wants to be in the management business. Many of you have heard of the debate around whether good managers and leaders are born or made. My experience indicates to me that you need inherent characteristics to be a good leader. In this article I will try to show why this is correct and to hopefully give people some helpful ideas from my own career experience. This fine magazine is about directors of maintenance or equivalents so wherever I use the word 'manager', its meaning shall be 'anyone in senior aviation maintenance management'.

Purpose

To share some ideas about the profession of management, in this case in an aviation environment. This story is based on my life but is not about me. It is about all the people who formed my technical and management career, who advised, managed and mentored me along the way. It is also about decision points and experiences that can shape one's skills.

Some Personal Background

A person's background plays an important role on how you will succeed in your career. I was raised in a small town environment where hard work and fair play meant everything to your reputation. As a teen I hated the thought of work but we all had to pitch in to make our collective lives a little easier. Throughout my life I never lost that work ethic and it has served me well. I played team sports, joined Scouts and the Army Cadets. It was in Cadets where I took my first leadership courses. Even as a young lad I was busy organizing, a trait that helped me in later life. As a child and young adult group activities form a basis of working with people, vital to a successful management career. One very early lesson was reinforced in my mind. Some older teens were digging a hole meant for an outhouse and finding coins as they dug. My first lesson in management!! By using money as the motivator the teens managed to convince my friends and I to complete the job for them!

Education and Training

My first take away from some 55 years of watching people succeed or fail in their chosen field is the level of skill they brought to the table. In the nineteen fifties completing high school was considered a good education. My technical education was achieved by joining the RCAF after completing high school. I later transformed this experience into an Avionics and M Category AME licence. During my air force time I completed my trades qualifications while on active duty in Europe as part of NATO. Back in Canada, after leaving the air force, I was hired by an airline. My technical training continued on a fast track with many aircraft and equipment courses. I also became involved in the union activities and began to take all the union courses that were

available. These were a benefit as they involved labour management, general management and so on. I also noted that many union leaders were promoted into company positions. This taught me that leadership and management skills were transferrable.

Fast foreword to the main part of my career as regulator where I ended up in a senior executive category. During those first years I took all the company sponsored courses available as well as any course offered by the union. I noticed that the more successful people used personal time for study so I spent a lot of time in the evenings and on weekends hitting the books. I soon found I was working with individuals who had far better education than I so I took the opportunity to absorb and learn as much as I could from them. As I was promoted I attended industry conferences in many countries where again I was afforded with great learning opportunities. As I began to climb the management ladder I realized I could not be the best tech and the best manager at the same time. At that point I dropped many tech courses and concentrated on management training and education.

The take away from all of this is that you need to get as much education and technical training as possible while you are young. In my time people without a university education could advance in the company, sometimes right to the top. Today, however, in industry and government one needs a solid educational background to succeed which includes a degree in some discipline. Since not everyone has the essentials to lead people you can find yourself managing people with higher educations than you own. I had the good sense to let them do their work and support them with resources and moral support and it worked out well for me.

Mentoring and Management Styles

My air force experience showed me that some managers were more adept at leading people. Their style left you with a sense of trust and you could expect their support in your work. Other managers led by authority but did not seem to gain the same sort of respect by the airmen. The good officers and NCOs were excellent communicators and took the time to be fair in their assessments and work assignments. The less successful seemed to be more interested in section or base politics and seeing who was in or out of favour. The best leaders also practiced a 'walk around' type of management. "Management by walking around" describes this technique as "marked by personal involvement, good listening skills and the recognition that everyone in an organization wants to do a good job." As an aside one reason the German armed forces performed so well in both wars was their practice of leading from the front and 'walk around' style.

The solid technical training of the air force served me well in my civil work as an AME. Going from a very structured work place to a more individual one was a challenge, but backed by a desire to succeed, I became more confident in my own abilities. After 6 months I never looked back and the day I went out on aircraft turnarounds alone was when I knew I could make a good life outside the military. Again I noticed the true managers, the better ones, had "walk around" style, were fair but firm and were good mentors. I recall one time I forgot to connect

the anti-skid connector cannon plug on one wheel. The DOM called me in which was quite unnerving because he was several levels above me and was a hard bitten old Irish AME. He warned me to be careful but to also remember that only people who do not work never make mistakes. I never forgot that lesson in my management of people. It was excellent mentoring. So the DOM sent me back to the flight line with that advice and I never forgot to connect anything again.

In my next job with a large airline in Toronto, I experienced some more excellent managerial examples. One base manager in particular did walk arounds of the shops and lines nearly every day, sometimes in the morning before he went to his office and sometimes in evenings and occasionally on midnights. He stopped and chatted with employees at all levels and never used the walk around to find fault.

My first government position was with Ontario government in vehicle, subway and bus safety. I was hired because of my AME background and systems knowledge. This is where I saw how much organizational politics plays a role in promotions. My director was a skilled engineer and politician. He mentored me in the necessary diligence in the written report, communications in all directions and how to work in a political environment; skills one needs in organizations especially large ones. Life has taught me that as soon as two people get together all of these issues come into play. If you have taken Gordon DuPont's 'Dirty Dozen' course you are aware of what I am referring to.

Once I got to Transport Canada I worked in many positions, in two regions and in headquarters and met many extremely dedicated, skilled individuals. My work took me to many conferences and seminars on all sorts of subjects in addition to meeting operators and manufacturers all over the world. This allowed me to meet many of the worlds best aviation experts in the various aviation disciplines. It was a steep learning curve and very exciting as well. One director advised me to take in as much knowledge as I can, sift it well before using it and that I should stay away from management fads. I lived through 'quality circles', 'just in time manufacturing', 'managing by objectives', and various financial systems and human resources philosophies. He said pick what works for your division and avoid following the latest fads. As it turned out it was good advice. As I was promoted I felt I needed more financial training so I enrolled in courses and seminars. I was at a big financial conference in Vancouver, sitting beside a woman who had many financial degrees. I asked who invents all these different fads. She said we have universities full of people working on new ones. This showed how well my previous director knew the world.

Project the image of the position you hold. I saw a few DOMs who when promoted never learned to act like a senior manager. One made the mistake of taking a desk on the hangar floor rather than on manager's row. A small thing you may think but it shut him out from the company decisions. Another DOM could not keep himself from going back to his tools which violated regulatory requirements and sent wrong message to his crews in addition to not having time for DOM issues. You must learn the culture of a senior job and speak in those

terms. An example would be explaining the financial and on time benefits of investing in new test equipment rather than just saying its broken and I need a new one. What you read is important as well. Read magazines like this one and other management, financial and human resource journals and media sources.

What Me

I do not consider my time spent as a technician to be management. Of course there was management required of time, tools, how to do the job and coordination with others. My first step into serious management was being promoted to Superintendent of Manufacturing, Repair and Overhaul. A senior manager had noted how well I organized things for the unit, seminars, audits, etc. He suggested that I apply for the position and as did some other inspectors. I knew I could not win on manufacturing knowledge as I had no training or experience there. I did have experience in repair and overhaul but decided to concentrate my preparation on leadership and management. To my surprise most of the interview was based on that and I got the job.

My first day on the job I noticed my desk was piled high with files. I asked my staff why and was told that it was the practice used by the previous superintendent. To decide every file, every inspection etc. I called a meeting and said you are all now responsible for your own files and if you want my input just ask. Within a week all files were gone from my desk and the inspectors were very happy to be considered capable of making the final decisions. Another lesson that lasted all my life. I succeeded in that environment thanks to the mentoring and sharing from my staff. I also put into action the 'walk around' practices I had seen before. I went with older, experienced heavy industry inspectors on inspections and audits and visited many hundreds of facilities. I soon became comfortable in aircraft and component manufacturing.

My next move up the ladder took me to headquarters for all of Canada. This was a much more senior position and I was soon active nationwide and worldwide and in a very political world as well. My love of reading, history and politics really helped me in this work. You never know what skills you develop when you are curious about things, so studying and reading are good practices to form. In the last 10 years of my formal career I was in a more operational environment at a more senior level yet. At one point I had 4500 people reporting to me for a short time and found that managing 20 or 4500 require the same skills since you really are working through and with other people. I had long ago learned that you always have customers, clients and staff. My last comment to anyone wanting to be a DOM is you must manage up, sideways and down; your superiors, your peers, your staff and your customers.

Summary

Early identified personality traits will indicate how well you will do in management. An ability to communicate and empathize with others is vital. The ability to control your emotions especially anger is a blessing as well. Emotional reactions were at onetime the norm but in most modern organizations emotional outbursts can lead to poor morale, grievances and other negative issues. Maintaining your physical and mental health are very important. You cannot be too sensitive to feedback or criticism, a difficult one for most of us. You must pay attention to those whom you may not really care for but they can sometimes be your best resource. Also, pay attention to the quiet one as well, it is all too easy to hear only the loudest and most talkative ones. Good written and verbal communication skills are a must, especially the ability to speak publicly to audiences. My final point is that you must be managerially competent and really like working with people. After I left full time aviation work and opened a consulting company I found that the skills I acquired were transferable to other industries, for example health care and other community projects, I have since worked on. The language was different but the management fundamentals were the same.

I have tried not to mention companies or names but some who read this article may think I am speaking of them, hopefully all is positive. Thanks to all who facilitated my journey through the 55 years of aviation work and management.