ABSTRACT:

Managing technical staff is becoming more difficult every day. The manager must carefully balance the needs of the organization with the needs of a scarce technical resource: trained staff. Directing technical staff can be a challenge for the manager who is hesitant to relinquish control, become flexible, and welcome the chaos that is inherent in our field. How can the manager deal with the realities of: Employee "poaching", making decisions about technologies that you know nothing about, employee moral and job satisfaction. Has the current trend for customer service and satisfaction made it even more difficult to attract and keep quality staff? This presentation will focus on you, the manager, and the "tight rope" that you must walk everyday: Keeping users happy, keeping your boss happy, and most importantly keeping your own staff productive and happy!
Managing with a Laugh

300 years ago (when I was in Graduate school) we learned about Theory X, Theory Y, MBO and about 27 other 3 letter combinations which provided the easy key to management. Theory X touted the idea that all workers were mindless peons and nothing would work better than a decent whip and a big chair. Theory Y taught us that people wanted to do a good job and a simple chorus of “We are the world” would be all that was needed to have a happy, healthy workplace. MBO? well....I still don’t understand MBO. Something about common goals and a shared vision, I think.

Management types then came up with Theory Z, Quality Circles, TQM and the like. Many managers adopt these new “theories of the month” with the zeal of a brand new Amway salesman and 6 months later are back out on the streets turning over rocks, hoping that a new management salvo will jump up and provide the magic cure. Well. to be honest, some of these management plans may have worked in the past, but let’s face it ..they ain’t gonna work today. Most management theories assume an abundance of low level, but well trained workers, who will buy into a plan of corporate esprit de corps.

We ,as IS managers in academia ,work in a totally different environment. I’ll bet Peter Drucker never took a phone call from a faculty member about a book that was moved while your network guy was in his office. I’ll further wager that Pete never had to deal with a committee whose members could only meet every 4th Thursday because everyone had different office hours! Traditional management theorists have never worked in an environment where it is necessary to try to keep top flight technical talent, especially when you can only pay 75% of the going rate for that talent!

Are we in a “world of hurt”? Yessirree, bub! Managers are asked to do more with less, knowing full well that the few good people that they have could walk out the door and within a week get a new job and a 25% pay raise to boot! You as a manager are expected to walk the thin line between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction. Which of these “satisfactions” are more important? The answer is somewhere between “the customer is always right” and “we’re IS, if we ain’t got it you don’t need it.

I believe that your first duty as a manager is to your own people. If you can’t keep your own staff happy, there is no way in the world that you can expect to keep your
user community happy. By keeping your staff happy, I certainly don’t mean that that you should run a comedy club or provide catered lunches 3 times a week. I propose that you strive to maintain an environment where your staff knows that you feel that you are in their corner. Too many time, we as managers are quick to take the side of the users. The total pre-occupation these days with “customer satisfaction” and TQM in large part doesn’t address the fact that your most important resource is your people. If your department is turning into a “revolving door” or you are simply turning into a training ground for the local big industry, you are not doing your users a favor. I know that when I go to the local car dealer to get my car repaired, I LIKE to see the same old faces working. It makes me feel that it is a good place to work, people are happy, and more than likely they will do a good job of fixing the car. If I see a lot of turnover, I assume that it is a bad place and something is wrong. I am not going to feel confident in leaving my car with them. I would hazard to guess that users tend to feel the same way about your computer staff. Users need to be trained, if you will, to respect the computer support staff at least as much as the do their plumber!

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Am I advocating a return to the “old” computer days of white lab coats and dumb terminals? Not at all. Certainly life for the IS department was much simpler. Users had dumb terminals and only asked questions about software that you had AT LEAST heard of. Users, clients, or whatever PC term that you prefer, are not necessarily smarter than those of the past, but they do have more of an idea about the capabilities of computers.

Traditionally, we have hired entry level workers in our computer centers because we could not afford to pay the price for top flight talent. It is certainly interesting that many institutions can bring in top flight faculty members at a relatively high salary, yet balk when asked to ante up $30,000 for a computer support person. It is incumbent upon us, and yes it is one of our main responsibilities, to constantly petition upper management in our institutions to recognize the importance of IT. We need to increase our visibility within the organization. Too often, “computer types” are satisfied to sit behind closed doors and simply mumble and mash buttons. We need to become a visible and integral part of the planning process within our institutions.

So, what can you do? Computer managers (especially in an Academic environment) are not always hired because of their computer expertise. I will wager that many Directors have never pulled wire or delivered a PC or even installed their own software. Given this assumption, many have no clue as to what is involved in the day to day activities of your department? What do your people do all day while you are stuck in meetings? Why do YOU sometimes make promises and create deadlines that THEY can’t meet? When users ask why it takes 2 weeks to have a computer delivered, you immediately confront your PC Technician and threaten to lay claims on their first born unless the complaint is resolved. When that critical wiring project isn’t completed on time, why do you rush to judgment on your own staff?
How can you become a better manager? How can you keep the talented staff that you have? It certainly ain’t easy, but here are a few thoughts to consider:

1. **Never take yourself too seriously.**

   Look, for the most part, people aren’t going to live or die based upon our decisions. We are already viewed by the user community as being somewhat aloof and uncommunicative. Do your best to break down these barriers. Encourage an environment where you and your staff are known as more than “computer jockeys”. What is one of the best ways to break down a barrier? Humor!

2. **It is OK to let your staff know that they are smarter than you.**

   If you were as smart as they were, you would be doing their job! Me, I don’t wanna know the minute intricacies of Java, but I do appreciate those who do. Complement your staff frequently. If they don’t do a good job....guess who suffers?

3. **It is OK to get your hands dirty**

   Ask your staff if they will show you how to pull wire, or deliver a computer or make “plug and play” really plug and play. Take a day and sit at the help desk and experience the frustrations of a front line support person. You will gain the respect of your staff, and hopefully gain the respect of your users.

4. **First, Assess blame**

   Many times the root of a particular problem is not with you staff. Yes, as a matter of fact, users CAN be unreasonable and need to be informed of such. The user community needs to learn to respect the computer center staff as professionals with an important role in the campus community

5. **Crosstrain**

   Users expect all computer people to know everything about computers. Maybe we should, I dunno. Nevertheless, we as managers need to devote the resources to crosstraining our staff. The fact that a key person on our staff is on vacation, doesn’t mean that work should wait until they get back. Cross-training helps to ensure that your department remains productive and also serves as to motivate to your staff.

6. **Listen to others, but always do what YOU think is right**

   Have you noticed, everyone on campus seems to know your job better than you? Give some people a computer and they become an instant technology expert! Look, you
are the professional, you are the one that upper management relies on to keep them abreast of the changes in technology. Even if you have a technology committee, the final decision has to be yours. Managing a computer center by committee is a sure recipe for failure.

7. **Don’t Micro-manage.**

    This one is simple, hire good people and get out of their way. Your job is to keep the wheels on track and well greased. Provide general directions, provide ideas, handle political matters, and track progress. That’s your job. Leave the technical stuff to your staff. Remember: They are smarter than you anyway.

8. **Make people aware of the Domino Effect**

    Sometimes users, or even your own staff make requests of you without looking at the entire picture. You are doing others a service by letting them know the impact of their requests. People tend to accept just about anything if they are kept in the information loop

9. **Reward your staff FREQUENTLY**

    If your staff is doing a good job, tell them! It is very easy to get discouraged and overwhelmed in this profession. A simple thank you goes a long way

10. **Life is good**

    Yep it is!!