Saving Management From Our Obsession With Leadership

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Lofty notions of leadership have captivated our collective imagination — and we've underappreciated and underinvested in the everyday management skills that organizations desperately need.

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For decades, business thinkers and the executives who look to them for insight have elevated the visionary, inspirational leader over the useful yet pedestrian good manager. But evidence all around us suggests that we devalue management practices at our peril: What we've come to denigrate as mere management (done by those who are *merely* managers) is incredibly difficult and valuable.

It becomes all the more vital during times of disruption and crisis. Take the COVID-19 pandemic: Whether we're talking about navigating supply chain disruptions, operating safely on the front lines, or simply keeping doors open for customers, businesses have desperately needed people who know how to coordinate action, solve technical problems, and deal skillfully with the myriad human challenges that employees and other stakeholders face. The same goes for organizations involved in developing, manufacturing, distributing, or administering vaccines and treatments. To meet the moment, we've needed managers who can keep things running and support employees — not leaders who give stirring speeches but remain detached from day-to-day operations.

The so-called Great Resignation has been quite telling in this regard. The people quitting in droves haven't done so because their company's top executive is insufficiently visionary or inspirational. Rather, people have quit lousy jobs — jobs that lack autonomy, variety, or opportunities to grow; jobs that pay poorly and don't reward performance fairly; jobs that aren't clearly defined and structured; jobs that lack guardrails that prevent chronic overload and frustration. [1] They've also quit their direct bosses, whose lack of everyday managerial competence, trustworthiness, inclusiveness, and care is no longer tolerable. [2] And they've quit organizations that have breached their psychological contracts with employees by violating the unwritten rules of trust, fairness, and justice. [3]

While the number of workers who have left jobs has been extraordinary, particularly in certain sectors, the reasons aren't new and shouldn't surprise us. Organizational researchers have been studying turnover for decades. The causes cited today — including the low job satisfaction, commitment, and engagement associated with poor management — are the same ones identified in hundreds of individual studies and multiple meta-analyses. In the decade before the pandemic hit, for example, the percentage of highly engaged employees never exceeded 22% among millions surveyed, and the relationship between low engagement and high turnover was well documented. [4] The COVID-19 pandemic might have created a tipping point for what people will or won't put up with at work, but it has not created or significantly changed the underlying problems — they've been widespread for a long time.

Why are these problems so ubiquitous and enduring? Because organizations and top teams downplay or ignore how hard it is simply to be a good manager — to skillfully hire, engage, develop, coach, supervise, evaluate, and promote people. Leadership workshops are widely available, but they tend to center on high-level concerns and spend little to no time teaching these critical, fundamental skills. Most managers aren't held accountable for building and exercising them, nor are they given sufficient psychological safety to focus on developing these basics, which people often assume anyone with a brain can readily master. Instead, they've internalized the strong message that qualities like strategic vision and executive presence matter much more, leaving them and their organizations poorly equipped to deal with reality.

To turn the tide, we recommend taking actions that directly address the reasons good people quit (or stay, but with low levels of motivation, commitment, or engagement). These evidence-based suggestions might look like nuts-and-bolts fixes, and in part, they are; we need to work on essentials. But they also require managers to recognize and appropriately respond to complex human needs and emotions — perhaps the very skills that are least likely to be replaced by automation or artificial intelligence anytime soon.

Before delving into our recommendations, let's take a closer look at how we got to this point, because understanding that can help us move past it.

A Flawed Distinction

In 1977, leadership scholar Abraham Zaleznik argued that managers and leaders are fundamentally different types of people. [5] Leaders, he contended, are bold, visionary, and inspiring; they create and articulate compelling missions and strategies. Managers are just implementers, he said; they organize people and tasks. Whether intentionally or not, Zaleznik placed leaders and leadership on a pedestal and, in comparison, denigrated the mundane activities of management and the managers who perform them.

The distinction Zaleznik made resonated widely: Forty-five years later, his views are widely held, despite little proof that prioritizing a narrow type of leadership consistently leads to positive outcomes. We recently conducted extensive research with nearly 2,200 participants from multiple countries and documented a strong preference for all things *leadership* over *management*. [6] Across multiple samples, the majority of people believed that prototypical leadership behaviors are harder to learn and more valuable than management behaviors, and by a hefty margin, they saw the designation *leader* as more flattering than *manager*. They were also more likely to want to hire and pay more for someone with strong leadership skills than for someone with strong management skills, even when the role clearly called for the latter. It was hard to get people to override this preference, even when we slowed them down and asked them to name the most important capabilities for the role before making their decisions. What we found, in short, was strong, persistent evidence of the "romance of leadership" others have described, where notions of leadership are based on conscious, rational assessment only loosely, if at all. [7] So much for the decades of scholarship and teaching about matching people to situations. [8]

If this preference for leadership over management were only a matter of semantics, or it showed up only as a hypothetical preference, there would be no need for this article. Mental models affect what we do, though. Consider how business schools describe what they're up to. Back in 1977, when Zaleznik's article was published, nine of the top 10 graduate business schools (as rated by *U.S. News & World Report*) used manager- or management-related words in their mission statements; only one mentioned leadership. But in 2017, nine of the same 10 schools' missions explicitly referred to leadership; only two mentioned management. Even researchers have dramatically shifted their focus away from studying managerial behaviors — like structuring employees' work, holding people accountable, making evidence-based decisions, and managing risk — and toward the study of transformational, charismatic, visionary, and other alluring leadership styles. [9]

Media coverage has taken a similar turn. For decades, the business press has lionized visionary leaders such as Elon Musk and Steve Jobs while dismissing managers as "paper-pushers, perpetuators of groupthink and symbols of organizational bloat." [10] Meanwhile, in organizations, HR professionals are scrounging for resources and respect, despite their expertise about everyday management processes and behaviors that research shows are critical to individual and group performance.

We're not claiming that no one else says good management matters. Zaleznik himself conceded that it does, as have other high-profile thinkers over the years. [11] But noting that it matters falls well short of acknowledging how hard or important it is and providing concrete guidance on what good managers do. That's our aim here.

Good Managers Design Good Jobs

Careful work design is often associated with organizational efficiency. It certainly has that benefit, but there's also a psychological upside: Managers can meet employees' needs for self-determination — that is, for belonging, autonomy, and a sense of competence — by crafting jobs that engage people without burning them out. [12] Missions and visions alone don't serve these functions.

Work design might sound like HR territory, but good managers understand its importance and have a hand in shaping it. They view and treat their HR colleagues as trusted partners rather than denigrating them as bureaucrats. Good managers help create jobs where people can do their best work without feeling confused, overwhelmed, or boxed in.

They define roles and tasks, and provide resources to do them. Exhaustion, frustration, confusion, mistakes, outbursts, and burnout: These are the consequences of jobs that lack clarity and boundaries — the things that happen before people quit or get fired. We've known about these negative outcomes for years, long before COVID-19. [13]

Good managers prevent them by defining employees' roles and tasks in detail. They spell out goals and expectations, explain the work to be done, specify what to prioritize, lay out reporting relationships and communication channels, and periodically check for understanding about these parameters to see whether clarification is needed. These "structuring" activities, largely ignored in recent decades despite reams of research showing their importance, provide stability, which allows employees to feel competent and in control. [14]

Often, the problem isn't that roles have *never* been defined; rather, it's that they haven't been updated to keep up with organizational changes or they haven't been defended against "job creep," which turns initially manageable roles into overwhelming ones. If you ask any employee what's been added to their plate in the past few months or years, they can most likely rattle off an impressive list. But if you ask what's been taken off their plate or what's OK to stop doing, they'll probably have a harder time coming up with examples.

In most organizations, managers are much better at adding work to meet ever-escalating needs than they are at stopping things that are no longer truly important or worth the problems they're causing. [15] Stopping things, it turns out, often requires courage because someone is invested in "what we've always done" or "the way things are." Stopping things means that some people might feel less competent initially or see their status decline, or that some groups now have less power or fewer resources. And so, fearing backlash (or protecting themselves from these same possibilities), many managers fail to subtract responsibilities and tasks to help employees stay sane.

A more constructive approach is to fight to match resources to new requirements. Good managers don't just accept mandates from above to massively increase the number of clients served or sales made without pushing for the necessary budget, staffing, tools, technology, and even time away (yes, balance is a resource) to reasonably meet these expectations. And if no amount of support will make new demands reasonable for those tasked with carrying them out, good managers find respectful but firm ways to say enough is enough. This isn't a sign that managers or their people are lazy or unwilling to go the extra mile; it's a sign they understand that what can be done for a short time in emergencies isn't sustainable and leads to major long-term problems with employee performance and well-being.

That's why Martin, an IT professional at a Fortune 50 technology company, describes Charlotte as the best manager he's had in his two-decade professional career. Looking back on their time working together, Martin told us he had been providing key technical expertise on a significant IT project with a demanding, inflexible client when his wife gave birth. Despite "sharp criticism" from the client and those above her, Charlotte insisted that Martin take some time to be with his family and rescheduled project deadlines. She strongly defended Martin's right to paternity leave and explained that calling him back early and burning him out would serve no one well. When we followed up with Charlotte, she said, "I knew when he came back he would continue to give 100% and beyond, which he did. In the end, [the project] was a success and was delivered ahead of time."

"Enough is enough" also has to be modeled at every level. There's no point talking about setting reasonable boundaries and expectations if managers themselves — and *their* managers — send emails at all hours, work through every vacation, and say yes to every new request from above. It shouldn't require courage to say no or post "out-of-office" messages. When managers do these things first, they enable others to follow their example without fear of repercussions.

They design for motivation. Making the work more manageable is an important start, but it isn't enough. The work itself must also have the potential to be motivating on an ongoing basis. This involves factoring task variety and significance into job design, making sure it's clear what success looks like, and building regular opportunities for growth into the job. Unfortunately, many jobs still lack one or more of these features, even though we've long known about their motivational benefits. [16]

Good managers take the time to identify problems that can make a job feel mind-numbing or meaningless. They can do this through candid conversations with current employees or focused questions asked during exit interviews. And good managers address the issues they find, ideally by allowing employees a say in how their jobs might be recrafted to be more motivating. Sometimes they need to recognize that a job's least engaging parts (or even the entire job) should be automated. But often they can switch up the tasks — through scheduled job rotations, for instance — or underscore the impact of the work by directly exposing employees to the people who benefit from it. For example, the crushing boredom and rejection involved in fundraising can be mitigated by having workers meet with those their efforts help. [17] Managers can also incorporate enjoyable experiences into otherwise dull, repetitive work. Warehouse managers, for example, can build gamified friendly competitions or celebrations of professional and personal accomplishments into the workday to help fulfill the desire for competence and belonging.

By also building decision-making into roles, even when certain tasks are inherently rote, good managers address employees' need for autonomy. While clear structure prevents burnout, micromanaging extinguishes creativity and initiative. Having clearly defined what needs to be done, at what quality level, for whom, and by when, good managers get out of the way and trust people to do their jobs. Debates about who must be in the office or work "normal" hours on the other side of the pandemic are telling in this regard, but they're not new: People have long desired the autonomy to determine when, where, and how they get their jobs done.

Good Managers Hold People to High Standards

For decades, we've been telling managers to be "considerate," "warm," and "relational." The evidence is clear: Treating employees nicely helps meet their need for belonging.

Although some managers struggle on this score, many others go too far in the other direction and fail to show tough love when it's needed. When being friendly veers too close to being friends — sometimes out of a desire to be adored rather than feared by employees — managers often leave the dirty work of having difficult conversations to others.[18] They stop telling hard truths about areas for improvement or confronting bad behavior, undermining both employee growth and organizational performance.

Good managers understand that such feedback is essential, and they don't shy away from delivering it to support employees' development and hold people accountable.

They tell the whole truth about development and performance. Everyone has room for improvement. Even the strongest performers need more than recognition for a job well done; they also need constructive feedback about where they've fallen short or what skills they should work on. Failure to provide that might be a byproduct of trying to build close relationships with employees, but it actually undermines trust. All but the biggest narcissists are aware that they're not perfect. Employees intuitively know that managers who aren't willing to give honest feedback on development and performance are probably not telling the whole truth about a lot of other things.

Ultimately, it's not "nice" to withhold information that would facilitate improvement and save people valuable time or energy. For example, in too many cases, employees are strung along rather than told why they're not going to get a desired opportunity or promotion. This isn't kind. It's cowardly — evidence of a manager who is too afraid to have difficult, emotional conversations. Withholding honest feedback is also a sign of disrespect — an implicit statement that employees are too fragile to hear the truth and that they would rather have a distorted positive view of themselves than the full story.[19]

A few years ago, as part of a research project on a national hospitality chain, one of us asked a set of managers to tell him about times when their own boss had done something for them that they considered courageous. Almost every response involved the boss telling the hard truth to the subordinate. One respondent said, "I desperately wanted to get promoted to the next job. I kept asking for the opportunity, but [he] was very honest with me, telling me, 'You're not ready. You need to work on getting these skills first.'" Was this kind of feedback well received in the moment? Often not. But over time, people came to understand and appreciate their manager's honesty, and it increased trust. As another respondent put it, "At first I was ticked off. … Then I saw it was reasonable. … Then the anger subsided, and I was able to see it as courageous."

They confront bad behavior. Good managers also call out bad behavior. They don't wave it away by pointing to the employee's supposed intentions. They don't just say, "It's no big deal," or tell themselves they'll address it later to avoid having the hard conversation or making the tough decision now.[20] In short, they don't engage in rationalizations that blind them to what's really involved: their own fear of uncomfortable confrontations or an unwillingness to deal with the fallout.

Here's an example from a case study: The CEO of a real estate investment trust was at a crucial juncture of a rapid expansion he was leading when he learned that Nate, a well-liked manager with a rare combination of skills, had hacked into and been reading his boss's emails.[21] When confronted, Nate admitted he'd done it and apologized profusely, saying he'd been terrified of letting anyone down and only wanted to stay ahead of the curve. Pointing to Nate's critical role in all that was happening and his motives for this first-time breach of trust, Nate's boss urged the CEO to give Nate a second chance. But the CEO insisted that Nate be fired immediately. You don't make excuses for someone when they cross a bright line like this, the CEO reasoned, because other moments of stress will surely come.

The CEO had it right: Rationalizing the behavior rather than enforcing consequences would have put the company's culture and external reputation at risk.[22] Firing a critical employee at a critical point demonstrated that ethics and trustworthiness were core values, not just nice ones to espouse when it was easy.[23]

Good Managers Focus on Fairness

Management doesn't happen in a vacuum. How employees feel about their job, their organization, and their relationships with coworkers and their manager rests mostly on relative judgments. It's not just how much you pay someone or how you speak to or evaluate them that matters; they also care about how you pay, treat, and evaluate *those around them*. Perceptions of fairness matter a lot, and those perceptions are based on comparisons. [24]

When perceptions of unfairness and injustice rise, employee satisfaction, commitment, and effort drop. Why? Because these perceptions undermine trust, robbing employees of the clarity, stability, and safety they seek. [25] That's why good managers don't just avoid the obvious trust breakers like yelling insults, stealing ideas, or blatantly discriminating against others. They also do the hard work involved in creating and sticking to fair processes and holding people accountable for following them.

They prioritize processes. To stem quitting, many organizations are increasing pay and starting to offer more generous benefits. But even in settings where those changes are badly needed, such as food service and retail, they're not sufficient. Employees also care a whole lot about *how* things get decided. What are the processes for determining how people get compensated, rewarded, promoted, selected for special assignments or learning opportunities, and so on? And is everyone subject to the same processes? In the workplace, these aspects of procedural justice often matter as much to people as equitable outcomes do. Good managers understand this. They establish clear guidelines for decision-making, explain what those are and how they're followed, and apply them consistently — all of which plays a huge role in employee satisfaction and intent to stay. [26] They also explain *why* decisions are made — for instance, that fewer people will be receiving top ratings because the company seeks to better differentiate and reward excellence and more honestly inform employees about where they stand — even when they know those decisions won't be popular with those affected.

Good managers also create processes so that employees can regularly articulate their needs and provide candid feedback on decisions that affect them. These include regular, informal coffee chats or lunches with the boss, as well as formal participation on key committees or task forces. By seeking this input, managers can avoid the classic trap of telling people something is important without actually operationalizing it. [27] For instance, they're less likely to espouse diversity and equity in principle while leaving unchanged the hiring and promotion processes that undermine these objectives. And they're less likely to tell people that the organization values long-term thinking without reworking evaluation and rewards systems and metrics that emphasize short-term performance.

In addition, good managers know that there's no point having sound rules and processes if they don't get consistently enforced. They don't make excuses and exceptions for selfish jerks who excel on individual metrics or for underperformers who are well connected.

They address injustices. Unintended harm happens no matter how well designed an organization's systems or how well meaning the people in charge of them are. For example, negotiations to hire or retain a high-value employee — or, for that matter, just to fill critical roles with available bodies — can result in other employees feeling they're now underpaid or not appreciated. And decisions kept confidential at one employee's request can leave others feeling excluded from something that directly affects them. This is particularly true in dynamic environments, where not every promise made can be kept and not every system proves durable as conditions change. Those are just realities, not signs of bad management.

The quality of management is determined by what happens next in these instances. For example, good managers push back against changes made at higher levels that are unduly affecting their own people. They don't hide behind displacement of responsibility, passively accepting that "someone above me made the decision." Instead, they seek to get bad decisions reversed — as Karim, the regional head of the luxury segment of a hotel chain, did. [28] Even though his business unit far exceeded revenue targets and operated at "unheard-of profit levels," Karim was told to cut management positions by 30%: "No questions; just do it!" But he wouldn't do it and instead wrote a letter saying that they could start their cost savings with his salary if they insisted on proceeding.

Being a good manager doesn't require putting one's own job on the line to get every justice violation rectified. It does, however, involve a willingness to undertake some risk trying to right the wrongs against employees. Your organization had to offer more to get new employees on board? Fine. Now fight to get other people the same deal.

Good managers also address their own broken promises and inconsistencies directly. They listen when people express anger or disappointment, and they try to find acceptable alternatives. And when they really can't fix something, they own it and apologize for failing to make things right. Even if this doesn't prevent a breach of trust, it can still avert a full-blown breaking of the implicit agreement that keeps employees connected to their organization. [29]

Clearly, it would be much easier for managers to say they're doing everything they can to uphold fairness but then throw up their hands when things don't work out as hoped. But doing so undermines behavioral integrity — a commitment to following through on fairness as a value rather than just talking about its importance. [30] This requires real strength, and, sadly, research shows that it happens way too infrequently. [31]

None of this is to say that bold, visionary leadership *isn't* important. In certain situations, it can be essential — for instance, for turning around a stagnant or failing organization, navigating technological disruption, or starting a new line of business. Nor do we buy into a dichotomized view of human beings and their capabilities. There are clearly people who can envision the future *and* persuasively share their plans *and* work with others to carry them out.

But implementing a mission or vision is every bit as critical as imagining it, and we need to start treating it that way. That means bringing in more executives who value good management and continue to practice it in the upper ranks — and deliberately building these skills when developing midlevel folks who aspire to take on bigger jobs.

Organizational success depends at least as heavily on this daily work as on the lofty stuff. Without strong execution, grand thinking — principled missions, compelling visions, and clever strategies — will amount to very little.

Despite the massive attention given to the inspirational aspects of leadership, the evidence is clear that most people in the workplace still aren't inspired, engaged, or truly committed. Many are heading for the exits. Good management can help solve these problems. It isn't less valuable than good leadership — if such a distinction should even be made — nor is it any easier. It requires guts, grit, and a lot of practice. And it's crucial to how people feel about their organization, how they perform, and whether they stay. Let's stop pretending that it's a lesser skill set — and get serious about building it.

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