

Becoming a “21st Century Manager” – The Managerial Skill Model



Becoming A 21st Century Manager The Managerial Skill Framework A Conversation

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Real World Expertise and Internet Popularity – the Difference

Recently, one of the young managers in my network and I had a conversation about becoming a “21st Century” manager.

Her: “So how do I go about becoming a 21st Century Manager. The Internet is full of advice on which smart skills I need – everything from time management to advice on how to structure my PowerPoints.”

Me: “Confusing isn’t it? You have to remember that popularity is equated to being an expert on the interest. The more hits you get, the more you can claim to be an authority. But being popular is not the same thing as being an expert, despite what Google search algorithms may think. When I think about being an expert, I always go back to what a great management thinker, [Herbert Simon](#) once said about expertise.”

Her: “Simon is the prof who got the Nobel Prize for the idea of satisficing, that managers strive for the good enough not perfection, isn’t he?”

Me: “Yes. Let me paraphrase what he said about being an expert. An expert is someone who over the course of years sorts through millions of chunks of information and insight. The expert puts about 50,000 of these chunks into an active inter-related network of ideas that allow that person to problem solve brilliantly in her or his area of expertise.”

Her: “So Simon is saying that being an expert equals being experienced.”

Me: “Not at all. Becoming an expert means having a motivated and active mind, and constantly sorting through and re-sorting through all of this information to come up with an ability that is pragmatically useful, that can be applied to real world issues to produce valued results.”

Her: “So being a Simon type expert is not the same as being smart. Sort of relates to the idea that here are lots of people with high IQs who are not really experts at anything, just bright. Isn’t that what the [Mensa High IQ society](#) is all about?”

Me: “Yes in some ways. But it is more than that. I have become fascinated by how Simon’s idea of expertise applies to magicians. [The best of them](#) are clearly Simon type experts, not just cognitively and but also physically. Just watch some of [the best close up magicians](#) at work. They are amazingly talented people, physically and mentally. They are true experts in Simon’s sense of the word.”

Her: “So how to I become a people smart magical manager?”

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Me: “The same way you become an expert. You start with a framework that is built on the solid past experience of others. You use it to guide yourself on a learning journey which may start with a workshop or e-learning program but is really a life long journey. You learn each of the skills involved piece by piece. You practice and get feedback constantly. You build up your personal network of inter-related abilities that allow you to create real results.”

Her: “So what framework do I start with?”

Me: “Here is the one that I use. It is based on two foundations – a review of the academic research and practical experience selecting, managing, and developing direct reports, as well as coaching executives and doing professional development work with managers

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Her: “So what does this tell me?”

1: Self-Awareness: The Core to Being More Effective at Work

Me: “Ok let’s take it piece by piece. Do the see the center – Self Awareness? We have known since a famous 20th Century American Management Association study that Self-Awareness is the key to professional effectiveness in the work place. Self-aware people are simply better team members, managers, and leaders, as evidenced by the results they produce.”

Her: “Why is this so?”

Me: “Self-awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence. The internal psychodynamics of this take a little time to clarify. You might want to look at an e-learning program “[EQ \(Emotional Intelligence\) for Working Professionals](#)” you can access on the Internet which goes into this.”

Her: “OK, I will check it out ... “

Me: “Once you start on the Self-Awareness journey you never stop. As you grow in skills, as your experience base grows, as your contact network grows, and as your responsibilities at work grow, you constantly expand the range and the depth of your self-awareness. Self-awareness is a process rather than an end place.”

Her: “So you are saying that staying in touch with yourself is something you need to keep on doing as you change and grow, aren’t you?”

Me: “Yes, being self-aware truly is a skill rather than a state of being. Let’s move on.”

2: Personal Skills

[Understanding Interpersonal Communication at Work](#)

[Asking Effective Business Questions](#)

[Giving Feedback On-the-Job](#)

Me: “So the next layer of skill – which builds on and at the same time extends self awareness is what I label Personal Skills. They are skills that you can use in almost any interaction, one-on-one and in teams and in groups.”

Her: “Any situation?”

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Me: “Sure, since most group interaction in meetings and such is really a series of sequential one-on-one interactions. These skills get you results in all of these work place situations. The context varies but you always are interacting with people - from one-on-one with direct reports to working team peers to meeting with folks from outside organizations and so on.”

Her: “What’s the best skill to start among these three?”

Me: “You need to be able to ask questions effectively in just about every work situation. You also need to be able to ‘hear’ what people say when you do. And, not just under every day conditions, but also under conditions of work place tension and stress.”

Her: “Isn’t asking questions just asking questions, like I just did?”

Me: “So you asked a closed question. I am going to answer it as if it was an open one. People often don’t get how important the structure of the question is in setting up the boundaries of the answer they get.”

Her: “Was that really a closed question? Guess I better check this out?”

Me: “Great. Simply understanding the difference between open and closed questions, and how they set up different response expectations is the best place to start. A recent [Harvard Business Review piece](#) showed how important this is, and how the ability to use open questions dynamically, in-the-moment, is key to getting information at work. You also need to understand what makes it [difficult to sometimes hear the answers you get](#).”

Her: “But don’t we all learn how to do this as part of growing up and being educated?”

Me: “Sure but remember Simon’s point – the key is sorting through all of this and organizing it into a powerful personal problem-solving framework that works for you. You need to move beyond the everyday, through the explicitly considered and integrated to do this.”

Her: “Right, take a course on asking questions. What’s next on this journey?”

Me: “Well, you see two more skills in this layer – “Giving Feedback on the Job” and [“Understanding Interpersonal Communications”](#). Again, by going through programs such as these, you don’t just learn these new skills, but constantly work on the sorting and integrating process that is the core of becoming a people

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smart expert on-the-job. Your work moves you from getting just another skill to becoming an expert, as Simon pointed out.”

Her: “I can see why you said that this is a journey, not just a workshop. So where do I go next on this journey?”

3: One-on-One Skills

Delegating Work to Individuals

Managing Individual Performance – Performance Contracting

Me: “So we move on to working with people when there is a clear power dynamic involved. You are the boss, and the other person works for you, however that is defined. You have position authority, the right to tell that person what to do and the right to evaluate that person’s performance.”

Her: “As the person’s manager, project manager or team leader, right?”

Me: “Yes, you are not just peers, but in a superior-subordinate relationship.”

Her: “So the model show two skills – “**Delegating Work to Individuals**” and “[Managing Individual Performance](#)”. What is so difficult about these two? Don’t we all just learn to do this as part of growing our work place careers?”

Me: “Well, there are dozens and dozens of training programs that address both. They are often called supervisory development programs. It turns out people need to learn to do both in order to do them well. You don’t learn to do them well by

Her: “Don’t managers have the responsibility to teach the folks they have working for them to do this?”

Me: “A few folks get lucky. They are coached by great managers as part of working for them. But most people are left to struggle with this.”

Her: “Yes, I can’t say that any of the folks that I worked for really helped me get better at this.”

Me: “That is the norm. Again, as Simon points out, by acquiring these skills more or less in sequence, you integrate these one-on-one skills into the personal people problem-solving framework you have been building up over time. Then you are actually able to apply your integrated people skills well on-the-job.”

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Her: “I am beginning to see why this takes a number of years. Becoming a people smart manager really means becoming a work place people expert, doesn’t it?”

Me: “Yes, it took me a number of years to figure this out personally. Because my post graduate education was in social and work place psychology, I got to see my own skill development as a progressive, every deepening journey. Of course, reading to people like Herbert Simon really helped me to this.

Her: “So being constantly being self-aware as your skill and knowledge grew help you do all of this?”

Me: “Yes, I was able to do exactly the kind of sorting that Simon describes. So will you.”

Her: “So how did this turn into a model for others to follow?”

Me: “Well, I ended up being an executive. I really started to see the results of taking this kind of progressive people skill development approach once I was responsible for increasing the productivity of the ever-greater number of people working for me, directly and indirectly.”

4 – One on Group Skills

Making Persuasive Presentations

Chairing Working Meetings

Facilitating Working and Problem Solving Sessions

Her: “OK, onward on this journey. From the model it looks like group management skills come next.”

Me: “You can find lots of great material on the Internet, as well as workshops, on making effective presentations. Persuading people through the way you present information is critical in every part of work: sales, product development and so on. You can get very [technical about this](#), and dive into the psychology of it all, or just take a workshop on making effective presentations”.

Her: “What about meetings and such? How do they fit in? I think I spend half my life at work in meetings of one kind or another.”

Me: “Yep, I did too, but I found that few people ran a great one. Again, the Internet is full of resources that tell you what to do, from [simple outlines](#) to [books](#).”

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Her: “So it all of this great material is available, how come so few people are good at running meetings.”

Me: “Back to Herbert Simon. First, most managers ‘satisfice’. They are content to go with ‘good enough’, which does not really mean excellence. As [Jim Collins](#) and others have shown so powerfully – good is the enemy of great. Most people are content with good enough.”

Her: “My take on that is that most of us work to live, instead of live to work. Once we get good enough results at work, we turn our energies into our social and personal life.”

Me: “I think that is part of it. But what Simon said is critical. You can change the level at which people satisfice. I found that when I implemented soft skill learning programs based on this progressive approach for the folks working for me the level at those people “satisfied” went up.

Her: “What do you mean? I am not sure I follow.”

Me: “The good enough bar got raised if you like. We became more productive because we had higher levels of soft skills. The increased productivity generated great returns on the money it cost to deliver the soft skill training. My job as an executive was not to change the fact that people satisfice, but to equip them with skills that meant they delivered more as they did.”

5 – Developing Others Skills

Coaching Direct Reports

Her: “So if I go on this journey, I need to put off coaching others into years in the future?”

Me: “No, think of becoming a people smart manager as being more like a journey on an ever widening spiral than on a straight, level path. You keep getting better and better at each of the skills, meaning you have more and more choices about applying your skills in work place situations. You deliver more and better results. Here is my summary of all of this in just 12 words.

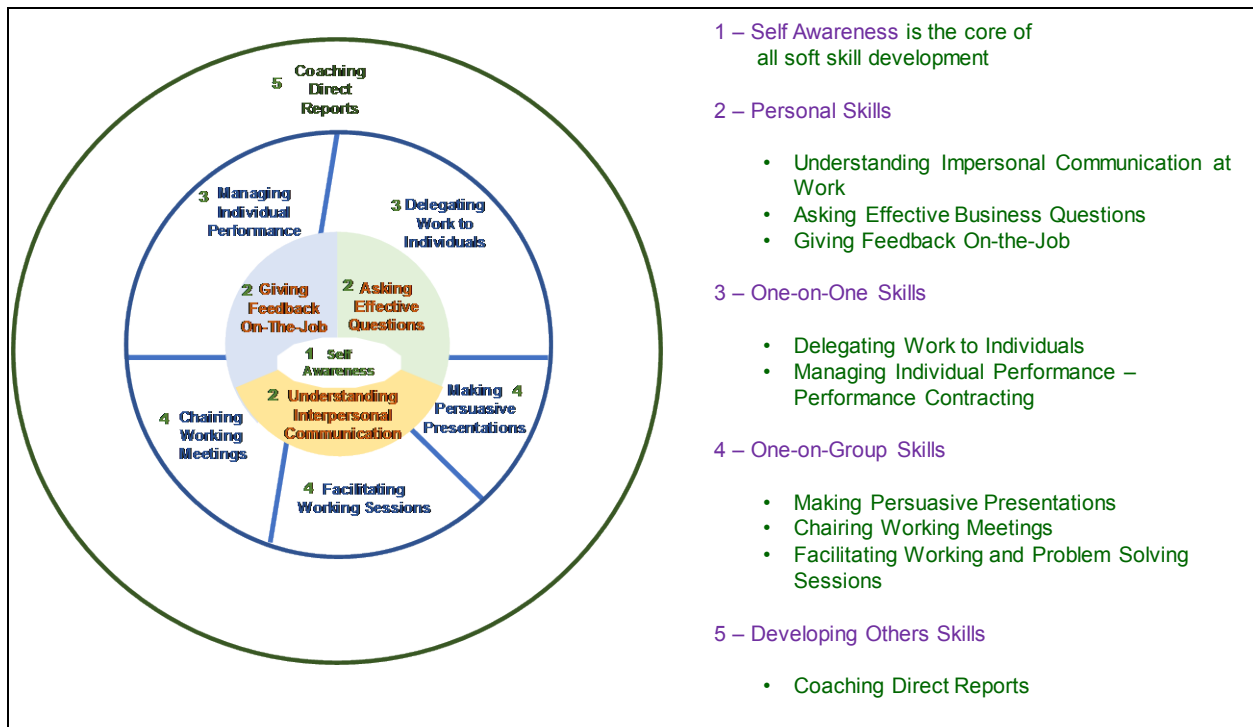
Feedback brings awareness.
Awareness bring choice.
Choice brings freedom.
Freedom brings effectiveness.

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Travelling Along the “Smart People” Skill Development Journey

Her: “Ok, I have the frame work now. Now it is up to me to find the motivation and put in the work.”

Me: “I am sure you will. Just make sure that you find coaches and trainers who understand this progressive approach to developing your personal ‘people smart’ expertise. There are no short cuts on this journey. Shape your approach based on a frame work such as this one. Structure your progressive skill development approach, practicing and getting feedback at each stop on the way. Enjoy the ever-increasing results you get as you travel along this spiralling journey to your personal level of people expertise.”



Does this approach to managerial soft skills make sense to you?

Do you have a different insight into what soft skills a manager needs to be effective as a leader of direct reports?