

The Most Important Management Skill

Abstract: Drawing on decades of interviews, research, and extensive experience, in this article, Terry Traut, CEO of Entelechy, identifies the most important management skill.

I've been teaching management and leadership skills now for almost 30 years to new managers and supervisors as well as to seasoned veterans. I've worked with some of the world's preeminent leadership and management thought leaders and researchers including Dr. Warren Bennis, Marshall Goldsmith, Pat Mitchell, John Kotter, Sir Richard Branson, Dr. Henry Mintzberg, and many others.

My company, Entelechy, has customized and deployed leadership development programs for some of the world's foremost companies and our programs have developed hundreds of thousands of leaders across the globe.

I've talked to thousands of employees and looked at what they wanted – NEEDED – from leaders that they felt they weren't getting, or getting enough of.

And, perhaps most importantly, I am a leader. I hire, fire, manage performance, coach, cajole, and counsel.

Based on my unique set of experiences, I'd like to share my belief of the most important management skill and I'd like to count down to that skill in David Lettermanesque fashion. You can see which skills I considered and why I believe each is important in its own right, but not THE most important skill.

#7 Know What Motivates People – Motivation is an intrinsic thing; theoretically you can't motivate someone who doesn't want to be motivated. While I agree with that, effective managers draw from a variety of techniques to encourage, inspire, recognize, and otherwise create an environment where many people ARE motivated. They recognize that each person is motivated by different things from simply having a job to contributing to something great. They also realize that what motivates someone tomorrow may be different than what motivates them today.

#6 Check In/Walk Around – The best way to manage – to know what's going on, to build the credibility that only comes from someone "in the know" – is to regularly and frequently get out there. Especially as more companies are moving to hybrid or remote work environments, connecting is more important than ever before, yet more and more managers and supervisors are isolating themselves to get the things done – reports, updates, budgets, analyses – that upper management is demanding. Effective leaders know that without the effective performance of their people, all of the ancillary work is for naught. The best way to see what's going on – and to be seen – is MBWA, Management By Wandering Around or, in this age of remote management, MBCI: Management By Checking In.

#5 Use the Right Tool – Effective leaders can draw from a variety of tools to use one that is most appropriate for the situation. Leadership and management research over the past 100 years has come up with a single definitive conclusion when answering the question, “what’s the best approach?” The answer is, “it depends.” It depends on the situation, the skills of the leader, the needs of the employees, and the unique interaction of the three. Effective leaders have an arsenal of tools to draw from and, most importantly, they have the performance analysis skills to know which tools to use. Coaching, feedback, counseling, information sharing, self-disclosing, encouragement, recognition, problem-solving, corrective action, and others are options that the effective leader can use at will.

#4 Learn and Practice Your Craft – Like parenting, most new to the position find themselves underprepared for the awesome responsibilities. In management, as in parenting, those who are most effective study the craft and consciously practice the art. While most of us were promoted to management positions because of our technical expertise and/or our ability to effectively collaborate with others, what brought us here won’t keep us here. In fact, many of our technical competencies work against us as managers and supervisors. We must learn a new set of skills and continuously hone those new skills. Fortunately, there is no shortage of books and courses on management and leadership.

#3 Self-Assess and Course Correct – Almost any management failure can be traced back to an almost conscious decision to ignore the realities of the situation. Ineffective leaders rely heavily on hope as a strategy to get through challenging situations. Effective leaders welcome – and seek out – feedback. Effective leaders are like pilots knowing that the only way they can reach their destination is if they seek in-flight feedback and make in-flight adjustments. Effective leaders use the “start, stop, continue” method of self-assessment; to increase their effectiveness:

- What should I start doing that I’m not currently doing?
- What should I stop doing that’s not working?
- What should I continue doing because it is working?

#2 Develop Your People – This is a leader’s “Job One.” Effective leaders know that they are only as good as the people who do the work. Talented, committed people are a company’s #1 asset. Effective leaders find ways to develop the talents of their people. Training, coaching, peer tutoring, cross-training, in-job development, online learning, job sharing, and delegation are but a few of the techniques that effective leaders use to grow the capabilities of their people. In the process, they foster commitment and increase productivity. Not a bad deal for the investment of time and money.

#1 Provide Regular and Balanced Feedback – While the other skills are important, the most important – and the one that most employees consistently ask for more of – is feedback. “How am I doing?”

I conducted a survey recently asking employees for their input on their bosses’ skills in a wide variety of areas from setting clear expectations to creating an upbeat environment. Three of the four most critical areas – areas needing the most attention according to employees – relate to feedback:

- Provide specific positive reinforcement regularly.
- Provide me with regular feedback about my job performance.
- Tell me when I am not meeting expectations.

Out of the 20 questions asked in the survey, only these three related to feedback – and all three appeared on the list of “most needed.”

Providing regular and balanced feedback, I would argue, is the most important management and leadership skill for a variety of reasons:

- **Employees want it.** In my experience, the most important lesson – from management to parenting to being married to sales to servicing customers – involves 1) finding out what people want and need, and 2) giving it to them.
- **It is free.** As leaders, much of what we need to provide our employees costs real money. Desks, computers, health insurance, compensation, and so on all cost money. Giving feedback costs nothing in real dollars; while it requires that you invest time to give feedback, it is just that – an INVESTMENT that will reap huge dividends in increased productivity and morale.
- **It increases performance.** With a focus on performance, feedback is instrumental in improving the likelihood that you’ll get more from your employees. Your consistent and specific feedback results in increased productivity and creates high-performing teams.
- **It is motivational.** Most employees – as we’ve seen in the survey results – want to know how they’re doing – with both positive feedback and developmental feedback. The reason feedback is motivational is because most employees want to do a job as effectively and efficiently as possible. With your appropriately worded feedback, you can create an environment in which employees are motivated to perform.

In order to deliver feedback effectively so others see the feedback as the gift it is, adhere to the following tips:

1. **Create a culture where giving and receiving feedback is the norm.** And that begins with you: ask for feedback. After a meeting. After assigning work. Anytime. Simply asking for advice or insights demonstrates that growth and development is encouraged and relying on others to help you grow and develop as a leader is critical.
2. **Remember the positive feedback.** While eventually you'll be delivering constructive feedback, establish yourself as a leader who focuses on the positive; as American author and business consultant Ken Blanchard said, "Catch someone doing something right and tell them." You a) establish yourself as an observant, performance-focused leader, b) reaffirm desired behavior/performance, and c) make someone feel good.
3. **Focus on the future.** We can't change the past, so providing feedback – no matter how well delivered – will not change what happened. To focus your feedback on the future, use the power phrase, "To make it even more effective the next time ..." or "To make it even better in the future...."
4. **Make the specific solution optional.** People tend to buy in when they choose to do something or do it a certain way. To help people identify the solution that works for them (and results in the desired behavior), use the power phrase, "You may want to" (Putting both power phrases together results in, "To make it even better the next time you may want to....")
5. **Forget the "sandwich method" of feedback** – you know, say one good thing before you slam 'em with the bad thing; then make nice by saying another – usually trite – good thing. Nobody's fooled! Make it ALL positive: "You've being doing this well and that well. To make it even better, you may want to try doing this...."
6. **Provide feedback all the time.** Ask for feedback all the time.

Be a leader – give your employees what THEY want and increase the productivity and morale of your team.

About the Author

Terence R. Traut is the president of [Entelechy, Inc.](#), a company that helps organizations unlock the potential of their people through customized training programs in the areas of leadership, management, and customer experience. Connect with Terence on [LinkedIn](#) or via email at ttraut@unlockit.com.

