



Manager, want a high-performance group? Focus on the working environment

It's always bothered me that building a healthy working environment isn't described in most managers' job descriptions. This oversight -- partially explained by the abstract idea of a working environment -- is the most important work a manager can engage in to improve performance. Yet, most managers lack a coherent strategy for creating it.

In this article, I'll help managers tune in to their need and ability to form an effective working environment and offer ideas to help them jump-start this critical work.

Tuning in to the working environment

The working environment determines how work gets done. It defines the rules for collaborating, communicating, problem-solving and decision-making, to name a few key activities. It also governs how people feel about each other and their work together.

Think of the best work or team experience in your career. Chances are, people arrived daily prepared to take on the world. I'll wager the group members knew how to engage, debate, resolve, challenge, fight, make up and ultimately push each other to be at their best. Yes, this was a healthy working environment.

There's a stark contrast between healthy and unhealthy working environments. In my experiences over the decades, the difference is explained by the manager or team lead's commitment to forming and framing the environment, not just working in it. Importantly, the potential for a healthy working environment exists in every team or group setting, but bringing it to life takes deliberate focus and hard work.

The 5 building blocks of a healthy working environment

Effective managers understand they control the weather on their teams. While the circumstances and variables change from situation to situation, they invest significant energy in five key areas that contribute to the emergence of a healthy working environment regardless of the situation. These managers:

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1. Create manager role clarity with team members

Most managers have a decent handle on what's expected of them from their boss. What's missing is understanding what their team members need and want from them at a point in time. If you are managing, try asking your team members what they need from you.

Use this simple, powerful question: "At the end of our time working together, when we're successful, what will you say I did?"

Yes, you and your boss get a vote on your role, but your group's needs at this point are what count when it comes to creating a healthy working environment. So, take this process a step further, turn their input into your Manager's Charter, and share it with them. Reference this charter daily as a quality check for your priorities.

2. Pursue rapid time-to-trust

The late Northwestern professor J. Keith Murnighan writing in the still relevant book "[Do Nothing! Discover the Power of Hands-Off Leadership](#)" suggests the idea of "Swift Trust" to raise the odds of success:

"Yes, it can feel awfully risk, and it is perfectly natural to be cautious, because trust always entails risk. But great leadership is not possible without trust: it is absolutely required."

And:

"By trusting more, leaders can start a positive chain of reciprocity. Taking a risk (with trust) with a professional has a very high probability of resulting in the person's stepping up and doing their best."

It's up to the manager to catalyze this positive chain of reciprocity. Instead of requiring group members to earn your trust, try giving it from minute one of your working relationship. Yes, do your diligence ahead of time, but if the evidence suggests the individual is capable, give your trust immediately. Individuals who feel trusted by the boss will move mountains to live up to this overt sign of respect. And, for the occasional person who betrays your trust, deal with it then instead of holding everyone hostage.

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3. Define clear rules for success

Think about your working environment. How do you answer these questions?

- What defines what's expected of you and your team members when it comes to working together?
- What does accountability mean on this team?
- How about trust?
- Where is the import and responsibility for giving and receiving feedback spelled out for the group?
- How are individuals expected to communicate with each other, particularly when they disagree?
- How are problem-solving and decision-making activities expected to unfold?
- How do you bring new group members into the fold and help them learn what it means to be partners in this work?

The activities defined in the questions above are standard parts of daily work life, and of course, everyone wants them to run smoothly. Yet, most environments have no guiding values or expectations to help people navigate the sticky parts, which usually involve people and differences of opinion.

The lack of these Rules for Success (effectively group values) leads to many less-than-ideal behaviors and unhealthy working environments. Fortunately, it's not challenging to fill this gap by engaging your team members and writing the rules for success.

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Engage your team members in an exercise to define what it means to be a part of the group. Use these terms as starting points: trust, accountability, communication, feedback, decision-making, differences of opinions. Ask them to put substance around these terms that clarify expectations and desired behaviors, and then roll them up with the desired name.

Some groups reference them as values, while others borrow with my encouragement the Rules for Success label.

This exercise fires up the creativity of the individuals involved. They feel empowered to define what it means to be a part of the group. And the manager gains a valuable platform for offering coaching and feedback.

4. Create connectivity to the bigger picture

The presence of a "clear and compelling purpose" is essential in team development and in providing context for contributor work in every setting. Help everyone around you see how their work connects to the larger goals and strategies of the organization, and reinforce the importance of their work to the larger mission.

In workshops with front-line managers, I observe a focus on the group's work but relatively little connectivity to the larger picture of the organization. The head of content marketing understands the importance of content to grow visibility and generate leads but has little understanding of how the group's work fits the larger goals. The customer service manager understands how their team's performance is measured but cannot connect to larger goals around lifetime value of clients or competitive differentiation.

If you cannot directly connect your group's work to your organization's or unit's goals and strategies, it's time to talk with your boss. Ask questions about plans, performance metrics, and strategy. Work together to drill into the information and create a connection between what you and your team members do and the bigger picture.

Armed with context for the importance of their work, individuals will move mountains to innovate, problem-solve and strengthen performance. And yes, these are all significant indicators of a healthy working environment.

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5. Create comfort with feedback in 3 directions

When I ask individuals how feedback should flow in an organization or group, 10 times out of 10, I hear, "Up and down." They're right, of course, but the answer leaves out the most critical direction: sideways.

Too often, we relegate feedback to a hierarchical process with the emphasis on top-down relationships. Yet, I argue significant performance gains from feedback occur when quality feedback flows horizontally between group members. Individuals can help each other adjust, adapt and learn on the fly. Importantly, everyone is comfortable bringing up the challenging issues standing in the way of progress and performance. Healthy working environments are characterized by quality feedback flowing in every direction.

The bottom line

Building an environment where individuals are motivated to do their best work collaborating, innovating, and problem-solving with team members is hard work. While most managers operate in transaction mode, fighting fires, dealing with priority shifts, answering questions from team members and participating in meetings, the best managers work daily to create a healthy working environment.

It might not be in your job description, but it's essential for sustained success.

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