

People performance: Can you believe what you see?

by Tomme Stevenson

When we are observing the behavior and performance of our people can we really believe what we see?

In 1927, the theoretical physicist Werner Karl Heisenberg developed the uncertainty principle. The uncertainty principle states that, at a microscopic level, it is impossible to know both the momentum and position of a particle. To do so you need very sensitive and generally very powerful measurement devices. As a result, those devices must disturb the very system under investigation. We have to look so closely at the thing being measured that we can affect how it behaves. Therefore, we cannot be totally sure of the results of the measurement.

I am convinced that some variation of Heisenberg's principle can be applied to the management of people, albeit not at the quantum level. There are many leaders today that manage people so closely that it affects their natural behavior as well as their performance. If left alone, their people would operate and behave differently, maybe even better. Therefore, the behavior that a manager thinks they are seeing – and sometimes measuring – is actually being affected by that manager (i.e. the observer). So how can the manager be totally sure about the results of their observations? How can they be completely certain that the performance that they are observing isn't being affected by their close monitoring and management of that person?

We know that this management style is called micromanagement. We also know that this management style tends to hinder the performance of the very people the manager is intending to invigorate. This is a paradox of management in general. Managers endeavor to attract, hire, and retain some of the best people in the industry. They will assign them to the most critical tasks, believing that these people will be the best people to make it happen. These leaders will ensure that these top performers have been provided with the most advanced tools available. They will make certain that the people are given the best training possible to guarantee their methods and techniques are honed. They will expend a lot of their company's capital endeavoring to guarantee the success of those valuable professionals that they hired. They will then manage these outstanding people so closely that they adversely affect both their behavior and performance. Unfortunately, this is a variation of the Heisenberg principle at a much higher level than the quantum level.

This is a scary situation, isn't it?

If this is your management style then the question becomes, "What should you do?" The assignment you gave to your people is extremely important to the company. In addition, the company is holding you, the manager, responsible for the success of this endeavor. So again, "What should you do?"

The answer is simple, remember, there is a reason why you hired those particular people. There is a reason why you placed these particular people on this critical project. You have endeavored to get the best and the brightest in each discipline that you needed. You didn't skimp. You didn't

compromise. You didn't settle! You pursued your people needs with the highest level of tenacity that you could muster up. You took time to pursue, select, and hire the right people because you knew that it would pay great dividends later on to you, the people you hired, and your company.

Now that you have surrounded yourself with successful, hardworking, highly skilled professionals, there is only one thing left to do...get the heck out of their way! There is a reason why you hired these particular people. These people are good. You know it...and they know it.

Your people will need a leader that is like the conductor of an orchestra. In other words, you need to let them manage themselves. The conductor does not tell the woodwind section how to adjust their reeds. The maestro does not show the percussion section how to tighten their drums. The conductor just assumes they know that part. The conductor ensures that they know how to play together to create beautiful music. The conductor coaches them on when to participate and whether they should be playing loudly or softly.

So the next time that you think you know and understand the performance of your people, remember the uncertainty principle. Ask yourself, "Am I having an impact on the performance that I am observing?" You must determine if your management style is that of a micromanager or a maestro.

Things I'm Not Certain About...(?!)

An interesting take on the micromanagement phenomenon. I have sometimes characterised my own management approach as being one of 'get the heck out of the way' so I am pleased to see it being echoed in this way!

There are a couple of points which come out of the Heisenberg analogy for me. I think that the theory applies both to excessive observation/measurement of performance (and likelihood of reaching targets) as well as to day to day high detail interaction (which we can characterise as micromanagement)

The first is that, if the act of measurement or observation has an effect on those measured, then it should really have some kind of reciprocal effect on the person doing the measuring - like gravity, if you like. If we push the analogy then it can be argued that the manager's own perceptions, preconceptions and behaviour are also modified by what they see (or think they see). This in turn may increase their tendency to micromanage especially if they do not particularly understand what it is that they are seeing.

The second is that the act of delegation also alters the power relationship between those involved, in that the ownership of the work, the ability to bring about a successful outcome on behalf of the unit, and hence the available power of any given individual, are altered by the movement of work between the manager and subordinate. In effect, the manager has made themselves and their reputation hostage to the subordinate and many subordinates do realise this - they have the strong threat and potential to screw up! This in turn alters the area and performance which the manager may be seeking to observe and measure - it is difficult to isolate the experiment into a glass dish and remove it from all extraneous factors, which makes the scientific assessment of cause and effect rather more

difficult. In short, the act of delegation has extended what might have been a closed system (subordinates) into a more open one (Section).

Third, if I understand anything about the original theory, there is a high level of statistical and phenomenological imprecision at the quantum level - I never did understand the issue of Schrodinger's Cat, or whether or not it was alive (!) - but there is a clear issue of focus and meaningful analysis.

One of the perils of micromanagement is the failure to make meaningful progress because you lose overview. The observation of individuals is overwhelming because their behaviour is a response to a wide variety of extraneous (well, external anyway) factors such as their home life, their hangover, their health, the drive to work this morning (and so on and so forth). There are simply too many variables to cope with.

It is then true to say that Heisenberg kicks back in because an individual may talk about (for example) home life but if they feel it is being lumped into the formal work situation (and taken note of) then they will clam up - sharpish. Once again, the ability to meaningfully interact with staff on a low level high detail basis is compromised.

As a theory Situational Leadership has a lot more support outside the USA

"Situational Leadership" as a formal management theory (and thus school / training regime) seems to have a lot more support outside the USA. It was (predominantly) developed in the UK and has a lot of support there as well as throughout Europe and Australasia.

It's exactly as you state:

* Each "situation" is measured by it's gravity / importance / threat: I think the actual word in the theory is 'impact'.

Each staff member is aligned according to their skill and experience in that specific situation. I think the word was 'competence' but it was more encompassing than the single skill-based definition.

The manager then adopts a method according to the individual and the situation.

EG If the situation is high-impact and the staff person's competence is low, then the management style is watch them like a hawk, do whatever to assist them through the process.

As the two measures change then the management style adopts accordingly.

The lower the impact or the higher the competence, the less involvement of the manager on that situation.

Thus it often occurs that a manager will potentially adopt multiple styles with the same

person throughout a working week or month, as it is entirely feasible that the person will be responsible for more than one task or situation.

In the three US companies with whom I undertook management training, the tendency was more to a singular 'style' per employee based upon (typically) their experience. In one, the style was more based upon the actual corporate life cycle - that is, in a start-up the CEO needs to adopt a down-and-dirty-hands-on-everything style, irrespective of staff experience or the actual situation.

Personally I have always tried to adopt the situational leadership model. But it can be tough remembering to jump in and out of different styles with the same person during the same day whilst you address different tasks or situations.

And as always it requires planning and effective communication with the person to work well.