

The Ninth Element of Great Managing **Employees mirror the work ethic they observe around them**

by Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter

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Free riders. Cheaters. Deadwood. Drones. Cowards. Slackers. Hitchhikers.

They go by dozens of scornful labels. During a career, everyone encounters at least a few of the people who strive to do the least they can do without getting reprimanded. Few factors are more corrosive to teamwork than the employee who skates through life taking advantage of the much harder work of others. This is the reason that the Ninth Element of Great Managing, which is measured by the statement, "My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work," is so predictive of a team's output.

The frustration of those surrounded by slackers is evident in their comments. "I don't like the quality of people who are hired and just don't care, don't make an effort, and just show up for a check," one employee complained in a note attached to her 12 Elements responses. "We need to do a better job of filtering out those individuals who bring down what others work hard to achieve."

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"I do not like coming into work and having to babysit coworkers who have little or no regard for their job," said another. "I dislike having to constantly tell people how to do their job. It becomes my job to fix what they neglected to do correctly in the first place." Other comments from the low end complain about "people not showing up on time for their shifts," "not doing their jobs and making me do the lion's share of the work," and "no one wanting to take responsibility for anything."

Pulling together

The problem is not new. One hundred years ago, French agricultural engineer

Max Ringelmann conducted one of the first studies of how teamwork affects performance. He asked men recruited for the experiment to pull a rope as hard as they could. He did this with various numbers of men on the rope at one time. Not surprising, two men pulled harder than one, three men pulled harder than two, and so on. However, when the force exerted on the rope was divided by the number of those pulling, Ringelmann discovered the force-per-man decreased as the number of men increased. The larger the group, the less the average man pulled.

Assume that the force one man can pull is equal to 100%. If two men are pulling, the average guy exerts himself at 93%. When four men are pulling, they average only three-quarters of their real capacity. By the time the eighth man is added, each man is pulling on average only half of what he could. In fact, eight men on the rope pull no harder than seven because the other seven relax enough to subtract whatever the eighth man adds.

"One of the truly remarkable things about workgroups is that they can make $2 + 2 = 5$," states one organizational behavior textbook. "Of course, they also have the capability of making $2 + 2 = 3$."

Given how desertions can snowball into devastating defeats, military commanders have always forcefully guarded against them. As George Washington prepared his troops to surreptitiously place cannons, fortifications, and themselves on Dorchester Heights to drive the British from Boston in 1776, he issued orders that "if any man in action shall presume to skulk, hide himself, or retreat from the enemy, without orders from his commander, he will be instantly shot down, as an example of cowardice."

Because 5,000 men of the Continental Army instead worked hard and harmoniously through the night, first light on March 5 found the British completely surprised, one American general remarking, "perhaps there was never so much work done in so short a space of time," and a British officer surmising the feat must have required 15,000 to 20,000 men.

In 1986, when the United States federal government changed the way taxes were calculated, the rate of compliance was discovered to have no correlation with whether a citizen's taxes were going to go up. But they were influenced by whether their neighbors, relatives, and friends said they supported and planned to comply with the changes to the tax code. In a similar vein, the state of Minnesota discovered higher reported income and fewer deductions among residents who were sent a letter telling them that tax compliance was actually higher than public opinion polls were showing.

The lesson from these disparate sources is what makes it so important that a team can positively and strongly respond to the Ninth Element. If a team lacks a strong work ethic and a sense of responsibility to each other, the group becomes a convenient place to hide a little slothfulness, to push a little work to the other guy, or to point fingers when a project doesn't hit its deadlines.

In an average team, about one in three employees strongly agrees that her associates are committed to doing quality work. But the Ninth Element is highly sensitive to the presence or absence of one or more slackers. When a team perceives one of its members is dragging his feet, the proportion that gives the Ninth Element a high rating drops to only one in five. If a team is free of deadwood, the proportion that strongly agrees with the statement jumps to half

of the team, with most of the rest giving positive, although slightly less emphatic, responses.

Responses to this element are remarkably similar across industries and type of job. But like the other 11 elements, it varies dramatically from one team to another. There are plenty of workgroups in which no one feels their fellow employees are committed to quality and those in which everyone on the team perceives a kind of universal allegiance.

The consequences apply to more than just pulling rope. At an Australian bank, variation in the Ninth Element accounts for a 14% difference in profitability across its many branch offices.

For a food manufacturer in Europe, assessments as to whether everyone is doing his part account for a 51% range in on-the-job accidents.

The many companies' performance data matched to Ninth Element scores show that people who feel part of a solidly committed team are routinely safer, better with customers, less likely to quit, and more productive.

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Precariously balanced

Law professor Dan M. Kahan illustrates the challenge facing managers with a large bell curve representing the typical team.

- On the far right are the most helpful of the group, those "dedicated cooperators" who by personal conviction will contribute their best to the common cause without worrying much about what the rest are doing.
- On the far left are a few "dedicated free riders," people who in almost any situation will let the others do the heavy lifting and keep their own resources for themselves.
- In between the extremes are those who reciprocate to various degrees. This majority of people will meet cooperation with cooperation and selfishness with selfishness.

Therefore, in the beginning, every team is poised to go into one of two cycles: one spirals downward into "every man for himself," the other spirals upward into "all for one and one for all."

In the lab, scientists have created the conditions and observed the consequences of rapid breakdown so often that the phenomenon is now axiomatic: Bring together a group of people and give them a chance to earn more by making contributions to the general welfare. If you do not incorporate any way of stopping the hitchhikers, more and more people will give up until almost no one contributes to the common good.

University of Zurich researchers Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter organized people in groups of four, then gave each some money and the option to keep it or contribute all or some to a pool of funds that would be increased by 40% and divided equally among the participants, regardless of whether they contributed some, all, or none of their initial stake.

At the beginning of the game, most players invested some of their money; the average was a little over 9 out of 20 points. But as the game continued, players who were contributing realized others were freeloading. "Subjects strongly dislike being the 'sucker,' that is, being those who cooperate while other group members free ride," wrote the researchers. The more helpful players gave up. Slowly and steadily, they reduced what they would put in the common pool until, 10 rounds later, the average contribution was only 3 points. The average participant, convinced he was being taken advantage of, kept nearly all his money to himself.

The researchers then added one condition. In the next set of rounds, players could spend some of their money on "punishment" points that would reduce the funds of the slackers. Even though spending money to punish another player reduced the punishers' own funds, they were quite willing to pay the price. At least now they could do something to counteract the free riders.

The desire for revenge is a potent psychological force, arguably more powerful than many incentives companies put out there to get employees to just get along or to overlook an associate's lack of work ethic. "Just pay attention to your own job" simply doesn't cut it in the mind of an employee who sees a bum in the office next door.

With the help of positron emission tomography to watch the workings of the brain, scientists in recent years have begun tracking the neurological mechanisms of revenge. One study found that the dorsal striatum, a portion of the brain that processes anticipated rewards, lights up when a test subject thinks of getting even. Although punishing someone else may be costly, many times it is psychologically worth it. Striking back "provides relief and satisfaction to the punisher and activates, therefore, reward-related brain regions," wrote seven researchers in the respected journal *Science*.

Adding the chance to even the score changed the whole game for Fehr and Gächter's subjects. Although the average contribution during the second set of interactions started near the same point where the first began, it grew from there until it sometimes reached 20. With accountability, "full cooperation emerges as the dominant behavioral standard for individual contributions." Average contributions reached 18.2, with 82.5% of players investing everything in the common pool.

Four crucial facts

It doesn't surprise scientists that people are often selfish and don't work together well during an experiment in which there are strong incentives to keep the money. In fact, traditional math-based predictions of behavior anticipate much more selfishness than shows up in real life.

But there are four intriguing aspects to these kinds of experiments that have theorists rethinking their ideas of human interaction. These little surprises are crucial for a manager to understand if she wants to increase teamwork in her own business unit.

“ The best managers know in their gut what social researchers have locked in through hundreds of experiments in cooperation. ”

- First, even though there are incentives to freeload from the very beginning, a large proportion of people start by venturing some of their money, maybe to test the waters, maybe out of a sense of morality. They arrive at a job fully prepared to cooperate with the group -- if they find cooperation to be the norm.
- Second, without any way of holding team members accountable for their work on the group's behalf, some will coast. Taking advantage of the group in this way creates resentment that causes many of those originally willing members to withhold what they control, and this snowballs into an almost perfectly selfish workgroup that loses the chance of making solid profits. For these experiments in teamwork without accountability, "it is well known that cooperation strongly deteriorates over time and reaches rather low levels in the final period," wrote Fehr and Gächter. "In view of these facts there can be little doubt that in the no-punishment condition subjects are not able to achieve stable cooperation."
- Third, even when it is personally expensive to punish another team member, many participants will "invest" in keeping the game fair. Researchers call this "altruistic punishment" because it requires a player to spend his own money to enforce the group's interest. "A subject is more heavily punished the more his or her contribution falls below the average contribution of other group members," wrote the researchers. This suggests that even with performance-based bonuses that create a risk of neglecting their own rewards for a while, employees' attention can be seriously diverted when a bad apple is in the barrel.
- Fourth, if team members can be punished for slacking, the slackers behave better and the naturally cooperative people, seeing a fairer system, become more willing to invest. The group's profits rise.

For a manager, the contrast cannot be clearer. Would he rather go easy on the foot-draggers and allow his team to become disheartened, possibly sidetracked by the powerful emotions of "altruistic punishment," or maintain work standards so the group enjoys the benefits of ever-higher levels of individual investment in the team's accomplishments?

Faced with one or more drones, a team has two avenues for relief. They may use various forms of social coercion to correct the behavior, or they must rely on the manager to punish lazy associates.

The first option, self-policing, is not uncommon, but it has limits in the normal course of office, retail, or factory work. Off the coast of Maine, lobstermen illegally cut the buoys from traps set in a fellow lobsterman's unofficial waters. One Oakland (Michigan) University professor issued advice on how to keep "hitchhikers" from hiding inside an otherwise diligent study group. "Set your limits early and high, because hitchhikers have an uncanny ability to detect just how much they can get away with," she cautioned.

Personal ostracism, refusing to work with someone (where that's an option), [or] a serious talk over coffee . . . all help set limits on those who always seem to make it home in time for dinner. Sports teams often have a player who helps lead and even reprimand. However, self-policing is limited by the authority of those who want to employ it.

Ultimately it may require the coach to pull someone off the field. The second, more powerful, and most obvious answer inside a business is for the manager to police the problem. The best managers know in their gut what social researchers have locked in through hundreds of experiments in cooperation.

"The prevalence of this sort of strong reciprocity is supported by a vast body of evidence," wrote Kahan. "So-called 'public goods' experiments -- laboratory constructs designed to simulate collective action problems -- have consistently shown that the willingness of individuals to make costly contributions to collective goods is highly conditional on their perception that others are willing to do so." One of the worst one-two punches to a team's *esprit de corps* and productivity is having a slacker in their midst and a manager who lacks the spine to do anything about it.

A good manager must continually ask herself whether her team tips that maybe-I-will/maybe-I-won't newcomer toward jumping in with both feet. This assessment was among the first questions asked by one Marriott hotel manager. "Who is the worst employee at this hotel, and how long have they been here?" she asked. Why did she want to know? "Whoever is the lowest sets your standard, no matter what you say to the contrary.

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