

Journey to Excellence: Excellence for Managers

As managers, we've learned that as part of our job, we should take advantage of those impromptu coaching moments that arise during the course of our day to day activities. When these spontaneous opportunities pop up, we must use that time to reinforce good work or guide our staff in the right direction.

Let's add to that coaching maxim and add that we should watch for learning opportunities for ourselves. Watch for these learning moments that arise when we least expect them.

Here's an anecdotal example of how I have turned my workouts at the gym into a learning experience. When I ride the stationery bike I take out my cell phone and play a video game to make time go by faster. Now, you may think that cell phone video games are a waste of time or just something to do—very discretely--during a boring meeting. But whether the game designers have done it on purpose or not, I've had a lot of management lessons reinforced while playing my game:

Look at the big picture—the whole screen—before you make your first move. Take time to plan your strategy and then make the moves that are in line with that strategy. At the same time, watch for the low hanging fruit and claim it, but check back regularly to make sure you are following that big picture goal. Be flexible enough to modify your strategy when you need to.

Rewards are much more effective than reprimands. My game doesn't have an "undo" feature. If I make a poor choice, I just don't get as many points. If I make a move that isn't allowed, all I hear is a little blip. On the flip side, my game gives me so many positive strokes when I do something right, it is addictive. Every time I score a point, I get a reward because I hear the sound of points scoring. When I score particularly well, a deep voice encourages me by saying GOOD! A few more points and I hear EXCELLENT!! And when I make a really good move, INCREDIBLE!!! Those words of praise teach me how to play the game even better.

It takes a team to reach the goal. When I arrange the symbols in a certain order, they turn into stars. When correctly aligned, the stars are worth more points. But there are only a few stars on the screen at a time, so I have to work with the ordinary symbols to score points. As managers, we can't rely just on our stars to help us reach our goals—we have to make use of all the players. That's why team building is so important.

Don't give hints too quickly and when you do give hints, make them subtle. My game tells me when there are no more moves. Yet sometimes I'll search the screen and just can't see the obvious move. At a timed interval, one of the symbols will twinkle at me, which is the hint I need to make my next move. But it is much more gratifying if I beat the clock and find that right move on my own.

Having fun makes work go faster. The thirty minutes I spend on the stationery bike fly by because I am distracted by my fun video game. Having fun at work has the same impact, especially during these challenging economic times. Celebrating achievements, birthdays, annual traditions or having an after-hours get-togethers bring about the camaraderie and enjoyment that strengthens work groups.

Measurement is important and leads to continuous improvement. How do I know when I am getting better at my game? Simple—it keeps track of my score for me. I'm always trying to beat my best score. I have gotten as far level nine and am working to see just how many levels there are. If your

organization participates in a performance management program, you know the value of measurement, meeting service targets and making process improvements.

Every level of the game gets more challenging. It requires more points to move from one level to the next, and that number grows exponentially. As the levels get higher, strategy becomes even more important. The same is true in our organizations. As managers, we can't just "show up" and be effective at our jobs. As we move up the ladder, strategic thinking becomes more and more critical to our jobs.

Luck helps. And as in real life, the more I practice and the harder I work, the luckier I get.

A closing thought: I can multi-task, riding away on the stationery bike, even pushing myself to go faster and faster. But my game improves the most when I focus on it alone. The *key* lesson is to spend some quiet time thinking about your game—your job—and how to improve your performance.