Chapter 1

Why Managers Struggle

The overall reason managers struggle to be successful in their jobs is their behavior. It is what they *do* or *don't do* that makes them serious performers, marginal performers, or failures. It's all about their behavior; behavior is the key to achievement.

In her 1980 book *Take Charge: Success Tactics for Business and Life*, Joan Koob Cannie, former chairwoman of Learning Dynamics, an industry leader in organizational development, put it this way:

> Research in several areas, psychology, management, and attitude change, shows that the single most important factor in success is behavior, not education or a string of degrees, not intelligence, not experience, or technical expertise—just behavior. And behavior is something we all do, the difference being in only how we do it.[1]

Consider the following three examples:

Have you ever gone to a high school or college reunion and been totally surprised at the level of success that some people have achieved? They may not necessarily have been on the honor roll or had the highest grade point averages. They weren't the class officers or the most popular students. They certainly were not voted most likely to succeed, but they did so in their careers, and sometimes in very big ways.

Many managers I have encountered are seminar junkies. They attend all the latest and greatest management and leadership programs. However, when you look at their results, you would never know they ever attended even one program. They have a huge gap between what they know and what they actually do.

I have also met many newly appointed managers, some of whom made a great first impression. They spoke the language of success. They had a wonderful personal bearing and seemed to be a "package" that could not possibly fail. However, over the years, as I followed their careers, they never became exceptional performers despite all the advantages they apparently possessed at the outset.

These examples point out the truth in Joan Koob Cannie's assertion: it is *behavior*—based on skill, drive, persistence, and ambition—that creates management success. But it is not just behavior alone. It is behavior that is repeated until it becomes habit. Exceptional managers do the same things, day in and day out, creating positive results.

Specific Reasons Managers Struggle

It is easy enough to say behavior is the overall reason managers struggle and leave it at that. However, to understand the deeper reasons managers face so many issues, we must explore their specific behaviors—the things they do and don't do.

Reason Number 1: Managers Fail to Build Trust and Integrity

The first reason managers struggle is that they fail to build trust initially or they erode trust with their employees during daily interactions and operations. Trust is the glue that binds managers and employees. If the employees don't believe in the messengers, they certainly won't believe in the messages!

A key leadership priority is to create an environment where trust can flourish. It is incumbent upon managers to hold themselves accountable for the level of trust that exists in their department or organization. A key obligation of managers is to cultivate the faith and respect of those who report to them.

Here are some examples of manager behaviors that build trust:

- Saying what you mean and meaning what you say
- Seeking input and feedback from your team
- Treating people with dignity
- Being dependable in meeting commitments
- Creating clear focus and objectives for people
- Creating a climate of open, honest, and direct communications

Without trust, there can be little cooperation among coworkers and between departments. This situation will result in little risk taking that could otherwise prove fruitful, less employee empowerment, a lack of commitment among employees and to the organization, diminished confidence in employees, and a loss of genuine communication throughout the company. Results will be seriously hampered in such a trust-averse environment.

Here are some examples of manager behaviors that build distrust:

- Lack of openness with employees
- Micromanaging
- Lack of respect in communications
- Lack of integrity and honesty
- Self-serving, hidden agendas
- Words and actions that are not consistent

Failure to build trust and integrity will result in a very low level of commitment from employees; in turn, they will often do just enough to stay on the job.

Reason Number 2: They Have the Wrong Focus

Managers who struggle spend too much time focused on things that don't really matter. For example, they may waste time preparing useless reports nobody reads. It is also possible for managers to get hung up on bureaucratic and nonsensical issues that often get institutionalized in companies. Some may even go to extraneous meetings that are of little or no value to them in an effort to avoid "real" work that actually produces results. Other managers stick themselves behind their desks, writing reports or pushing papers because that is what they are most comfortable doing.

Add to these examples the number of distractions managers face every day due to constant interruptions caused by ready access to electronic devices. Managers can easily get absorbed with e-mail, text messages, phone calls, and phone messages—most of which keep them from focusing on what is really important.

> Stop doing things that don't matter!

I always tell managers to stop doing things that don't matter! You will find people sometimes complain that they "have to" attend a meeting, file a report, or even go to a training program. My response is always the same: if it doesn't fit into one of the Four Fundamentals: growing revenue, getting new customers, keeping the customers they already have, or eliminating costs (discussed in the Introduction and detailed in Chapter 3), they should rethink what they're doing.

You will find that when enough of your employees get this message, the news about what you consider important will spread quickly. Productivity will improve, and so will results. But remember one note of caution: unless you, the manager, continually reinforce the Four Fundamentals and what's important, unnecessary activities will always creep back in.

Reason Number 3: They Don't Model or Build Accountability

It is critical for the manager to be *the* model of accountability in daily operations. Managers need to realize their behavior is in a "fishbowl" and thereby highly visible for their employees to see and imitate. Employees watch their manager in all situations, but especially when the manager is under stress. What the manager says and does in stressful situations sends a signal to all employees to imitate that behavior, even when they are not under stress. If a manager blames or bashes others, becomes sarcastic, or makes unethical choices under stress, that manager is setting a tone of unaccountability in his or her department—a tone that will have a negative impact on results.

Accountable behavior is at the heart of achieving results. Such behavior includes:

- Taking action
- Making decisions
- Being proactive
- Owning issues and problems
- Demonstrating commitment
- Rising above circumstances
- Taking extra steps to get results

> **"Poor performers thrive in an unaccountable work climate!"**

Here is something I have discovered: *poor performers thrive in an unaccountable work climate!* Why? Because they never take responsibility for missing a deadline, not achieving a positive result, making a poor decision, or taking an action that backfires. There is always something or someone for them to blame, and they continually have an excuse. Unaccountable behavior is at the root of this poor performance and includes behaviors such as:

- Blaming others
- Rationalizing poor results
- Making excuses
- Ducking issues
- Whining
- Letting things slide

It is important for the manager to build accountability in others as he or she attempts to improve performance. Specifically, managers must reinforce the concept of accountability through feedback, coaching, and performance tools. Using accountability as a consistent message in your feedback comments to employees, and in your coaching sessions with them, will go a long way toward letting all employees know accountable behavior is expected in your organization.

A variety of performance tools signal the importance of accountability in employee behavior. Clear performance measurements and milestones and well-explained objectives help ensure accountability for an employee's actions, behaviors, and results. With goals established, performance becomes as clear as your bowling score or your golf score—no one has to tell you how well you are doing; it's there for you to see. You have a set of visible metrics that you are accountable for, providing you with ongoing feedback on your performance.

You can also use a variety of reporting techniques to help you achieve an accountable work climate. End-of-week "5:15 Reports," for example, will help track both your and your employees' progress on the way to achieving results. Performance agreements such as these will clearly set expectations for the results that you and your employees are accountable for. Market and operational reviews will also formalize the reporting on accountable objectives, while tough questions and uncomfortable conversations during these reviews help ensure accountability. Finally, when accountable objectives are off track, performance improvement plans will help reestablish them through an action plan.

We will define and provide additional information on these tools, with specific examples, in Chapter 6.

Reason Number 4: They Fail to Consistently Reinforce What's Important

The fourth reason managers struggle is they fail to reinforce what's important. It sounds obvious, but I have found that it's not always easy to do. Managers often stress a particular message, a goal, a tactic, or a program, for a couple of weeks. Once they think their people "get it," they believe they don't need to talk about it anymore.

Unfortunately, they are wrong.

When managers assume their people get it is when "it" starts to be forgotten. Employees watch carefully to see what their manager thinks is important in an effort to please their boss. When managers stop reinforcing something, it usually signals to their employees that either it's not important anymore or it's not as important as it once was.

Another reason managers stop reinforcing something that's important is because they get tired of saying the same thing, and delivering the same message, over and over again. I've always cautioned managers that they are the ones who often will be the first to get bored with their message. However, don't let your own boredom cause you to change your message.

When managers change their message too often, people become confused about what's important. They wonder whether your last message was the one that was most important, or whether this one is, or whether the next one will be—what I call the "message du jour syndrome." The people who work for you perform best when what you say is consistent and frequent.

Reason Number 5: They Overrely on Consensus

Many times, managers struggle because they try to become consensus builders. They go to a lot of effort to get agreement from others before they make decisions or take action. These are the managers who like to touch every base and obtain agreement from everyone before moving ahead. In order to reach consensus, they usually alter their plans or modify their proposal in some way. To get the buy-in from everyone they work with, they will likely end up with a watered-down version of the original decision or action they intended.

These are the same managers who overrely on consensus, taking them much more time than it should to reach a conclusion on how to proceed. Consensus managers seldom survive long in their jobs, especially if they work for companies operating in highly competitive markets. In such markets, decisions must be made quickly to respond to rapidly changing market conditions. Generally, I have found consensus managers hesitate to take action because they lack confidence in their own decision-making abilities. They are afraid of making a mistake. If many others are brought into the process, however, and the consensus-building manager ends up making a mistake, he or she is comforted by the thought that the blame will be shared.

Here's an example to help clarify this concept.

If I'm a consensus manager, I want all the people with whom I work to agree to a course of action I propose, and if they don't agree at first, I will simply modify my position until they do. Ironically, what we all finally agree to may be so compromised that it might not accomplish what I initially set out to do.

Let's say I'm a district retail manager. I'm responsible for 10 of my company's stores located in the western portion of my state. Ten store managers report to me. We are experiencing a very slow period, and I am far off my sales targets for the quarter. I badly need to boost my results before the quarter's end, which is quickly approaching. So I propose a plan to get more shoppers into our stores by mailing a $10 gift certificate to those we consider our best customers, based on their previous purchases. The gift certificate would be applied to all purchases over $100 completed before the end of the quarter.

When I ask my store managers to agree to the plan, three of them say $10 is not enough, three say they want the $10 gift certificates to apply only to specific products, and the four remaining managers don't want to do anything because they are already meeting their sales targets for the quarter.

In order to reach consensus, I compromise by proposing a $15 gift certificate that customers can apply to a half dozen of our products. Six of my managers are satisfied. I also tell the four managers who are meeting their sales targets that they are not required to participate. The good news? I have reached consensus! The bad news? I've lost time getting my plan implemented. I've also caused customer confusion, since customers can use their gift certificates only in six specific stores. In the end, I have probably missed my sales targets for the quarter.

> **"It is more important to take action, even if it is imperfect, than do nothing."**

I have always believed it is more important to take action, even if it is imperfect, than do nothing. Inaction or delayed action is a much bigger mistake than moving ahead, even though the action taken may need to be modified in the future. It's okay, in my book, for well-intentioned managers to make a mistake as long as they recognize their mistake quickly and take appropriate corrective steps.

I'd like to be clear that it is, of course, important to research your decisions and call upon the best resources possible to help you understand and reach the most appropriate courses of action. However, such informed decision making is much different to me than the counterproductive consensus-building process described above.

I have worked for several consensus-building managers over my career. They were nice people. They meant well. Unfortunately, managing results was not the job they were cut out to do. Eventually, they missed their objectives, and they lost the respect of the very employees with whom they worked to reach consensus on nearly every decision.

Reason Number 6: They Focus on Being Popular

The first priority of a manager is to deliver results. It is not about building friendships. Early on, managers learn that it's important to focus on the people who work for them. I agree: it is always important to focus on one's employees, but that focus is not on being their friend, nor is it necessarily on making them happy—which is a mistake a lot of managers make.

> **"The first priority of a manager is to deliver results. It is not about building friendships."**

Think of it this way: happy employees don't necessarily bring you stellar results, although I would argue that stellar results often bring happy, or at least satisfied, employees.

When results are achieved, pride builds. When pride builds, so does confidence. With confidence comes the desire to do even better. Trust and loyalty then grow. Good managers understand this process and therefore "drive" results, giving little care to building personal friendships with employees. Instead, these managers want trust and loyalty, which is exactly what sustained performance gets them.

Here's a note to new managers: I've found that your employees, most likely, will not trust you, or even like you, at first. You may find they will want to do things the old, comfortable way even if it doesn't lead to positive results or if they aren't totally realizing their potential. University of Southern California business professor and author Warren G. Bennis calls this the "unconscious conspiracy"—the tendency for people not only to want to keep things the same but also to unconsciously undermine efforts to change. Of course, some employees will also consciously attempt to do so.

Good managers don't worry about shaking up the status quo or unintentionally "hurting" people's feelings, because they know all the employees will "feel good" later when results are achieved, not missed. Those managers who prefer to avoid confrontation and change within an organization end up harboring employees who stay comfy, don't get results, and wallow in their lack of performance, but love their boss over the short term for being so "reasonable and understanding." Over the longer term, however, morale suffers, commiseration runs rampant, targets continue to be missed, people resign—or, worse yet, they quit trying but stay with the company—and, of course, eventually a new manager shows up.

The bottom line is this: leadership should never be a popularity contest. Managers who try to be popular often lose their focus and waste energy. Remember, *results are what matter*!

Reason Number 7: They Get Caught Up in Their Self-Importance

Another reason managers struggle is due to what I like to call the "all-about-me" syndrome. I often find that managers who fail do so because they get caught up in the "aura" of their position and become hung up on their own self-importance. They seek recognition and often glamour for themselves. These are the people who can't wait to read their own name in print or see their picture in the newspaper. They love to give speeches to groups and in places that don't really matter. These managers look forward to playing golf with suppliers and vendors and enjoying "business" lunches and dinners. I think you get the picture. In my opinion, none of this kind of behavior is important or productive, and it most likely distracts from the manager's real job: achieving results. Managers who suffer from the all-about-me syndrome seldom see that what is causing their own demise is their diminishing attention to what is important and their growing infatuation with what isn't.

When I started my career with New York Telephone in Buffalo, New York, I observed a sales manager who clearly suffered from the all-about-me syndrome. Each year the company would hire a small number of Ivy League college graduates and place them into an accelerated "fast-track" management development program. These individuals were the best and the brightest of their graduating class. During the hiring process, they were informed that if they came to work for New York Telephone, they would be trained to become senior-level managers in the company. They would be placed in various individual assignments that lasted from six months to a year. After several of these assignments over a period of years, they were guaranteed promotions to mid-level management positions followed by additional promotions until they reached the top-management ranks.

The sales manager I observed was a participant in this fast-track program. We all knew he was in the program—primarily because he told us about it at every opportunity! He would repeatedly remind us of his college credentials and his special status as a member of this fast-track development program. He also would let us know that he only expected to be in our department for a short time. He thoroughly enjoyed talking about himself.

Of course, it wasn't long before he was widely disliked.

The one thing we did like about him was that he wasn't in the office much. He spent much of his time introducing himself and presenting his résumé to mid-level and senior-level managers all around New York State.

Six months came and went, as did his first full year with the company. While other participants in the fast-track program had moved on to a second and third job, he was still a sales manager. In addition to having a problem of being disliked by his peers and sales representatives, his sales results were the poorest in the area. Before his second anniversary with the company, he wisely decided to seek employment elsewhere.

Here was an employee who, by all appearances, could have quickly moved up the ranks of the company, but because of his behavior—being so focused on himself—he missed the fact that he actually had to achieve results in order to be considered for his next promotion.

The best managers I've worked with are too busy driving results to seek recognition for themselves. When positive recognition does come, they make sure it's focused on their company, their organization, and their team—in other words, on the people they work with. A truly good manager knows "it's *not* about me."

"A truly good manager knows "it's *not* about me.""

Reason Number 8: They Put Their Heads in the Sand

Many managers struggle because they only want to hear good news. It would be nice if there were always only positive news to report, but of course, this isn't the case. These "good-news-only" managers create a work environment that encourages good news and punishes bad news. This is the type of environment in which, when employees bring problems or issues to their boss, he or she either refuses to take the time to listen or ignores the problem and allows it to persist. I remember one boss of mine who actually said, "The good things we do are mine. The problems are yours. I don't want to hear any of your problems!"

Employees who work for good-news-only managers quickly learn to report positive information, while hiding any problems. As a result, productivity suffers, employee morale decreases, and targeted results are missed. The environment created by good-news-only managers can lead to disastrous consequences, and when you are afraid to tell your boss the truth, trouble can result for you, your organization, and your company. There are even instances in which employees have attempted to avoid telling their managers about negative financial results by reporting fictitious financial results to the public.

The best managers I've worked with, however, not only want to hear about problems, but encourage their employees to tell them when they encounter problems or issues they feel are not right. Good managers want open, honest, direct, and specific communication regardless of the information being presented.

Reason Number 9: They Fix Problems, Not Causes

The ninth reason managers struggle is because they fix a problem without addressing the reason the problem occurred. Unless managers fix the causes of the problems they experience, it is very likely the problems will reoccur. Managers may then find themselves constantly putting out fires. Valuable time will be spent fixing the same problem over and over again, which can become a huge source of frustration.

In most cases, this situation occurs due to three issues:

1. The manager doesn't have the time to immediately address the cause of the problem. A manager's failure to take the time to fix the cause of a problem ignores the fact that the problem will

simply keep coming back. It is much more effective and efficient to address the problem and get it resolved immediately, even if it means the manager's attention must be taken away from other important tasks!

2. The manager doesn't have the resources to address the cause of the problem. I recognize that, in the real world, resource constraints are a significant issue that managers grapple with continually, but to avoid a reoccurring problem, resources must be found to address its cause. As discussed previously, it is much more resource-efficient to fix the problem's cause as soon as possible. Maybe it can't be done immediately, and maybe it can't be done all the time, but it must be done diligently to conserve time and resources in the future.
3. The manager believes that the problem is beyond his or her control. I have often heard managers say the cause of a given problem is not within their control. In other words, it's someone else's issue to fix. For example, the cause may be in another function or organization in the company. This way of thinking is very shortsighted. A manager can point a finger at someone or something else and place blame, but it still doesn't solve the problem once and for all. The manager needs to "force" the right things to happen. Managers who have a desire to fix problems and their causes can almost always find the means to do so.

As we wrote this chapter, I thought back on my own experiences with managers who struggled in their jobs and who were ultimately removed from their management roles and either reassigned to different positions within the company or asked to leave the company entirely. Every one of these managers I can think of who was reassigned or terminated struggled because of one of the nine reasons described in this chapter. Now that we have covered the basics about why managers have difficulty in their jobs, we will turn our attention to the details of the impediments behind struggling managers and focus on how managers can break free of them and ultimately become successful.

Chapter Summary Points

1. Behavior is the key to achievement. It is what managers do or don't do that makes them successful, mediocre, or a failure.
2. Managers must change their behavior in order to stop struggling and become successful.
3. Exceptional managers are results-focused, first and foremost. They are consistent. They rely on practicing the same successful behaviors, day in and day out.

Chapter Action Guide

Now that we have reviewed the nine reasons managers struggle, I'd like to offer an opportunity for a self-evaluation. If you're a new manager, or a veteran manager who would like to refresh your skills, take a few moments to respond to the questions that follow. Your answers will help you identify the specific chapters of the book where your interests and priorities may lie and give you an idea of the opportunities that you have to be a better manager.

Where Do I Stand?

Behavior: What You Do or Don't Do
Can you identify specific management behaviors—new things that you are doing or not doing—that you put into practice over the last year?

Nine Reasons Managers Fail: How Do You Stack Up?

Reason Number 1: They Fail to Build Trust and Integrity
Do you say and do things that erode trust within your work climate?

Reason Number 2: They Have the Wrong Focus
Do you feel you are wasting time, effort, and money by focusing on things that just don't matter in getting results?

Reason Number 3: They Don't Model or Build Accountability
Do you have a tendency to blame others, point fingers, or look for excuses?

Reason Number 4: They Fail to Consistently Reinforce What's Important
Do you have a core performance message—like the Four Fundamentals—that you constantly talk about with your employees?

Reason Number 5: They Overrely on Consensus
Do you find that your decisions are delayed or end up watered down because of your overemphasis on consensus?

Reason Number 6: They Focus on Being Popular
Do you feel a strong desire to be liked, to be popular, and to befriend people, and is this having a negative effect on your management results?

Reason Number 7: They Get Caught Up in Their Self-Importance
Do you have a high need to gain admiration, be in the spotlight, and get public accolades?

Reason Number 8: They Put Their Heads in the Sand

Do you react poorly to bad news, hide it, or dismiss it?

Reason Number 9: They Fix Problems, Not Causes

Do you tend to fix problems with Band-Aid solutions rather than seek and eradicate the root cause of the problem, even if it may lie in another area?