

The Desktop Manager

Donald L. Lester, Middle Tennessee State University
John A. Parnell, University of North Carolina at Pembroke

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Management researchers have spent decades trying to decide what managers do and should do to be effective. From the classic planning, organizing, directing, and controlling framework to the more complicated and extended versions, researchers and consultants have told managers how to manage. Academics have studied the actual day-to-day activities of managers, categorizing, timing, and describing the daily activities of effective and ineffective managers. These efforts notwithstanding, what managers do remains a topic of interest throughout the field.

American icon Harold Geneen, former head of the conglomerate ITT, simplified this discussion for everyone when he said simply, "Management must manage!" (1984; p. 111). By this, Geneen meant that managers must do whatever it takes to achieve the goals they have set for themselves and their organizations. A similar perspective was recently espoused by Jack Welch when he defined 'tough-minded' bosses as those who "set clear, challenging goals" (Welch, 2006), connecting the goals to performance expectations. Unfortunately, modern organizations are hiring and promoting a growing number of technically-skilled managers who do not manage, choosing instead to stay at their desks, attend the occasional meeting, and avoid two things: Talking to their people and taking responsibility for workgroup goals. This is the description of the desktop manager, a new phenomenon in management and the focus of this paper.

In some respects, the desktop manager is a practical outgrowth of its cousins, the ingratiatory or impression manager and the charlatan. Indeed, impression management can involve a host of behaviors that attempt to control the images projected in social situations through verbal or nonverbal tactics (Tsai, Chen, and Chiu, 2005). Impression management is an attempt to control others' perceptions (Leary, 1995). Parnell and Singer (2001) focused on charlatans (e.g., imposters) and developed a scale to measure the false performance of the impostor at work. While it should be recognized that everyone hopes and even strives to make a positive impression in the workplace, the behavior becomes negative when it is the focus of a manager's time, as opposed to managing the workgroup.

The desktop manager frequently exhibits behaviors akin to ingratiation, impression management, and charlatanism, often because they lack people skills that many believe are necessary to be an effective manager. While impression management and charlatanism are commonly exhibited in face-to-face communication, the desktop manager chooses to practice these behaviors through computer-mediated communication (O'Sullivan, 2000; Walther, 1992), developing relationships and forming impressions online. In the era of knowledge management, desktop managers use the personal computer and the Internet to create images of themselves that involve no visual interaction.

The Internet and the personal computer are used to increase productivity, but too many times this technology becomes a barrier, not a boon, to performance (Desouza, 2003). Performance can be damaged when a manager who lacks people skills tends to communicate only through technology. Employees are faced with a communication disconnect due to a lack of face-to-face discourse with their-supervisor. With information systems' growth and sophistication, practically

all operational data is captured in today's organizations, facilitating the almost constant use of the personal computer by desktop managers. To compound matters, the Internet is an inexhaustible source of information also accessed through the personal computer, providing a manager so inclined with the opportunity to spend an inordinate amount of time plugged into a vast internal and external network. This network facilitates reporting responsibilities and external analysis, while limiting communication to e-mail.

How have today's organizations moved from an aggressive agenda of must manage to the passive avoidance of people and goals exemplified by the desktop manager? With the recent introduction of a skeptical, less loyal generation of workers, it is easier for some individuals to masquerade as high performers in positions where they are poorly managed and appraised. Interestingly, the personal computer and the increasing importance of information management and the Internet have enabled managers to be more productive while facilitating the propagation of the desktop manager (Wallace, 2004). The problem is too complicated, however, to be blamed on the dissemination of computer technology and the central role it plays in today's organizations. A brief review of relevant research is presented as a background to a more in-depth discussion of the desktop manager and possible solutions for this growing problem.

Understanding What Managers Do

Early management practitioners attempted to define management in terms of behavioral categories. French mining executive Henri Fayol (1930), for example, suggested in the early twentieth century that managers should plan, organize, coordinate, command, and control. Over time, this list was shortened, becoming the classic four actions that characterize a manager: planning, organizing, directing, and controlling.

Around the same time as Fayol's work, management researchers, particularly those in Great Britain, studied the actual day-to-day activities of managers, chronicling by time, place, and description what managers did every day. These studies looked at exactly where managers were at a certain point in time, who they communicated with, how, the nature of the situation, and the final action taken. The prevailing wisdom was that the more we understood what managers did the better we could predict what they should do.

Considering what managers should do, Mary Parker Follett espoused the integration of individual goals with organizational goals as the best solution to goal conflict (Follett, 1924). Other options, such as one side submitting to the other voluntarily, one side submitting after a prolonged struggle, or both sides trying to compromise were each considered inferior by Follett to the optimal solution of goal integration, or finding a solution where both sides are satisfied and neither dominates the other. Managers who fail to understand the individual needs of their employees stand little chance of moving an organization forward.

Luther Gulick attempted trying to present a more modern adaptation and expanded the list of managerial actions by proposing the acronym PODSCORB (Gulick, 1937). This list includes planning, organizing, directing, staffing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting. His work was followed by possibly the most widely read and studied of these projects, Henry Mintzberg's (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work*. Mintzberg's research went beyond identifying what managers do, categorizing those actions into roles. Mintzberg described three roles managers' play -- interpersonal, informational, and decisional -- within which practically any activity a manager undertook would fall.

According to Mintzberg, leadership is the critical interpersonal role, one that relates to "involving interpersonal relationships between the leader and the led" (Mintzberg, 1973; p. 60).

Subordinates focus on actions by their managers for clues as to their leadership style, using these clues to guide their own behavior to mirror what is important to the organization. Further, leadership has two important roles in an organization. First, following Follett's logic, leaders integrate the needs of individual employees with organizational goals. Second, leadership manifests a manager's power. Managers are powerful in a legitimate sense based on their position. However, this power base extends to reward and coercive functions, which reinforce the importance of interpersonal relationships with employees.

Shortly after the publication of Mintzberg's work more than three decades ago, the phenomenon of impression management began to receive attention. One stream of research in this area considered impression management as an influence strategy used by subordinates to ingratiate themselves with their supervisors or influential workers (Ferris, Judge, Rowland, and Fitzgibbons, 1994; Liden and Mitchell, 1988; Schlenker and Wegold, 1992; Wayne and Kacmar, 1991). Workers who effectively managed their images or engaged in ingratiation were found by Tsai, Chen, and Chui (2005) more likely to be hired, promoted, and appointed to attractive job assignments than those who did not.

Meanwhile, a practical perspective of management behavior was presented by Geneen in his 1984 book *Managing*, a sort of how-to manual based on his years of experience managing people, particularly other managers. Geneen believed that a successful manager set standards of performance for his organization and was not satisfied until those standards were met. According to Geneen, the mark of a successful manager was one who rolls up his sleeves when adversity strikes, as it always does, rather than caving to other interests. When adversity brings problems, the successful manager redoubles efforts to find solutions and keep the organization moving forward.

Geneen also noted that too many managers refuse to manage and thereby pass problems on to someone else down the line, and that someone else is eventually the customer. Just as quality control is best managed at the point of the problem, for example on the assembly line, so, too, are problems that come before managers. Those who do not do what it takes to make it right when confronted with a problem are more concerned with self-preservation than with accomplishing organizational goals. Instead, ineffective managers tend to delegate and then abdicate, failing to follow up. Managers who delegate and abdicate are not managing anything but merely finding ways to avoid handling problems. Geneen also criticized the ineffective managers' proclivity for office politics, which can destroy vibrant organizations, as managers exhaust their energies through personal maneuverings, spreading malignancy and stagnating companies.

It is worth noting that Geneen has not been without his critics. His iron-will management of ITT put an enormous spotlight on numbers. He oversaw a conglomerate of some 350 divisions in 80 different countries, a daunting task. Geneen's training was in accounting, and he believed the numbers provided the answers to most business questions. However, he also visited those divisions regularly and held monthly meetings where all division managers were required to make presentations. In this way, Geneen could not only stay current on each division's performance, he could also look each division manager in the eye and discuss future courses of action. While the numbers were critical, Geneen also wanted to take stock of the manager as a person on a regular basis. This relentless dedication to his work earned Geneen the label of the best business manager in the world during his prime. It also produced 58 straight quarters of earnings growth for ITT (Useem, 2002).

Knowledge Management and the Emergence of the Desktop Manager

Peter Drucker heralded the age of the knowledge worker two decades ago, describing a unique development in organizations where the people being managed actually understood their jobs better than their managers. Knowledge workers use their brains rather than their brawn, drawing on knowledge, theory, and concept to contribute to their organizations. To manage knowledge workers, according to Drucker, interpersonal skills are needed, because knowledge workers require regular communication with their supervisors.

In their article on understanding the various media choices available to managers, Trevino, Daft, and Lengel (1992) emphasize that face-to-face communication is the richest of available communication media. Face-to-face communication involves verbal content, nonverbal cues such as body language, and even telling facial expressions. All of these help convey feelings (Winger, 2005), the kind of information about their managers that interests most workers.

While business schools, consultants, government organizations, and other groups try to reinforce this need for interpersonal skills, many organizations continue to promote technically-skilled workers who severely lack interpersonal skills into management positions. We have labeled these technically-skilled supervisors desktop managers. The implication is straightforward: Desktop managers spend most of their time at the computer. In many instances, consciously or otherwise, their goal is to avoid interpersonal contact by rigidly maintaining the status quo.

This phenomenon illustrates what we call the Internet productivity paradox. Since its inception, the Internet has purported to increase efficiency by facilitating analysis, effective communication, and improved organization. Although one might argue that it has been largely successful in all three respects, in some cases it has shifted attention from effectiveness -- doing the right things -- to efficiency -- doing things right. Desktop managers embody the down side of the paradox, over-utilizing e-mail, submitting lots of reports, and burying themselves in mounds of self-generated paperwork.

Interestingly, desktop managers are typically among the most efficient workers in the organization. Their ability to navigate the organization's latest software or find information on any topic on the Internet has become more important than the ability to manage the organization's greatest resource, its people. The goal of an effective manager is to accomplish effectiveness as efficiently as possible, or to borrow a phrase from the total quality movement, do right things right.

The desktop manager is in direct contrast to the kind of manager most organizations are desperately seeking, one that manages with a strong interpersonal flare. As Geneen stated, a manager who manages effectively does whatever it takes to achieve the needed results. A poor economy, supply shortages, tough competitors, and the weather are just excuses for an inept performance. As such, the desktop manager is known for three tendencies: Self preservation, conflict avoidance, and appeasement.

Self preservation

The primary goal of the desktop manager is self preservation. Constantly working to stay on the "good side" of supervisors, avoiding making decisions, blaming bad decisions on their superiors behind their backs, and passing the buck are all examples of self-preserving behavior.

Once a technically-skilled employee moves into a managerial position, the demands of the job tend to quickly become overwhelming. To manage the ensuing stress, desktop managers begin a pattern of behavior that focuses on administrivia, the practice of majoring on the minors. In

particular, administrivia is made up of detail work, necessary but not sufficient for a successful, profitable organization. The constant attention to the computer screen keeps the desktop manager up-to-date on everything going on in the company, while his workgroup flounders under a blanket of poor leadership. Reports are finished in a timely manner, paperwork is processed smoothly, and future projections are submitted far in advance, while issues in the workgroup go unaddressed.

This kind of work, much of it previously performed by assistants or secretaries, is necessary in organizations, but it is not managing. The desktop manager, however, is convinced that performing efficiently in all manner of administrivia can mask inadequate people management. Yet, interpersonal skills are perhaps even more valuable in today's environment than ever. As Drucker put it, leaders of the past knew how to tell others what to do, while leaders of the future will know how to ask. Considering that approximately 80% of the growth in the United States over the last decade was in knowledge-based jobs, effective personal skills are at a premium. Too many times, the desktop manager chooses to tell, not ask, and the method of telling is via e-mail.

Conflict avoidance

The second priority of the desktop manager is conflict avoidance. In years past, ineffective managers tried to look busy by always walking fast and carrying a clipboard or staying behind a closed office door for most of the day. In today's organizational environment, however, managers accomplish the same objective by focusing on the computer screen, sometimes intentionally arranged so that the manager's back is to the office door or cubicle opening. When something requires attention and the desktop manager cannot escape, the task is usually accomplished through e-mails or paperwork so that human contact -- and the conflict it might bring -- can be avoided. For example, if the work schedule needs to be adjusted, a manager might make changes without discussing them or why they are needed. The problem, of course, is that conflicts are rarely resolved when they are avoided; instead, they tend to fester into more serious problems.

Why is conflict avoidance so important to the desktop manager? The primary reason is because conflict tends to reveal their serious shortcomings: the inability to communicate personally with people in a productive manner and the inability to manage effectively. Focusing on administrivia requires no people management skills, which is why effective managers use assistants and employees for much of their administrivia duties.

Appeasement

The last priority of the desktop manager is the proclivity to appease everyone in the organization, particularly those in upper management. Employees will even refer to desktop managers as "nice people," but they are quick to add they totally lack management savvy. By appearing to be efficient, working with external groups, and putting requests from superiors above the actual needs of their employees, desktop managers not only survive, but often thrive. Whether their organizations thrive as a result of their performance -- or lack thereof -- is another story.

To summarize, a typical profile of a desktop manager would include the following tendencies:

Self preservation

* Focusing on staying politically connected with superiors.

- * Spending hours daily in front of the computer, both at the office and at home, paying particular attention to administrative tasks.
- * Willing to try new management fads because they divert attention from having any real purpose or accomplishing any real goals.
- * Blaming tough decisions and an inability to provide vision or direction for the workgroup on the budget.

Conflict avoidance

- * Leaving problems unattended until, hopefully, they resolve themselves;
- * Confronting difficult situations, particularly those involving people problems, only when forced to do so.
- * Setting no specific goals for the workgroup.

Appeasement tendencies

- * Fostering disharmony unknowingly by trying to stay on everyone's good side.
- * Believing that political knowledge, not factual knowledge, is power.
- * Working hard to build external allies through active participation in clubs or associations to create the perception in the local community that the desktop manager must be a valued employee.

In Search of Effective Management

Whenever a corporate CEO is asked to describe the firm's most valuable asset or the key to its success, the answer almost always points to the organization's people. Systems, processes, patents, machinery, information, channels of distribution, brand names, reputation, and a myriad of other organizational resources are important to success, but little can be accomplished without capable people. Managers who manage know how to manage people. Or, put another way, if a manager is good at filing reports and processing information but cannot manage people, effective management is not occurring.

Effective managers, or as Geneen would say, "managers who manage," understand that although problems can be serious challenges they are a big part of the reason managers are needed. Although sometimes self-directed work teams are successful, invariably there is a team leader or a designated team member who acts as a quasi-supervisor. People need someone to help them while they are on the job.

This help takes on several forms, such as planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Or as Mintzberg (1973) related, managers take on roles within the organization that involve providing information, managing people, and making decisions. Desktop managers fail in all three of these roles.

As organizations deal with ever-increasing competition, finding and retaining loyal and capable knowledge workers is one of their greatest challenges. Workers who populate our factory floors and warehouses are being asked to bring an understanding of technology, interpersonal skills (particularly communication skills, verbal and written), critical thinking skills, the ability to allocate resources such as money, time, and materials, and the know-how to comprehend systems so they can monitor performance and make corrections where necessary. If such diverse skills are required by the "doers" in an organization, why is it often difficult to find managers that know how to communicate with their workgroups?

One possible explanation for the prevalence of desktop managers in recent years is poor

evaluation systems. Far too many firms continue to utilize one-way evaluation systems, where only managers evaluate managers. By eliminating input from employees regarding their supervisors, organizations are assuring the continued poor performance of desktop managers. Certainly, subordinate feedback can be difficult to handle, especially for the bad managers receiving the feedback. However, supervisory performance cannot be objectively evaluated without subordinate appraisal. Understanding why desktop managers are so detrimental demands this base-level input, yet organizations continue to skirt the issue of evaluation by paying only lip service. We recently encountered a hospital that evaluated five departments, each with its own supervisor, as if they were one. When surveyed about supervisory performance, the most common response was, "Which supervisor?" This organization obviously did not want to know what kind of job its supervisors were doing.

Another possible explanation for the prevalence of desktop managers is the propensity of organizations to promote technically-qualified people into supervisory positions. This narrow view of management relies almost exclusively on technical expertise, hoping it translates to management ability. If, as Mintzberg suggests, managers serve in informational, interpersonal, and decision-making roles, technical expertise declines in importance. This problem is not new to the information age or the proliferation of the knowledge worker. However, it has become much more acute as the demands of technology, globalization, and information management have increased.

Conclusions

Addressing the desktop manager is a complex problem because the main concern is not what the manager is doing, but what he or she is not doing. Administrivia can be necessary, and a manager should not be punished for doing it effectively. The problem arises when the trappings of administrivia replace people management at the core of a manager's responsibilities. As a result, combating the plague of the desktop management does not mean simply improving one specific function of the manager. Instead, it is a more difficult undertaking, requiring the transformation of the desktop manager's philosophy of management.

In a recent issue of *Fortune* (Kirkpatrick, 2005), Bill Gates of Microsoft and Ray Ozzie, founder of Groove Networks, which was purchased by Microsoft, discussed the ridiculous lengths workers have gone to in trying to use e-mail. Ozzie referred to entire projects being managed through e-mail, and Gates railed about the constant exchange of attachments that need revising. Some firms are even banning e-mail lists. The reality of today's workplace is that e-mail has become ubiquitous, and co-conspirators of this growing problem are desktop managers. The reality of productivity is that a person can spend half a day every day reading and responding to e-mails. Much of this is time wasted. While e-mail is not the only reason for desktop managers continued existence, it is a great excuse.

The advent of e-mail and the Internet have contributed to the surge of desktop managers in recent years. Indeed, these powerful and productive tools enable a manager to appear effective with only a few clicks of the mouse, although empirical research on the impact on business transactions by the Internet is scarce (Brews and Tucci, 2003). Recent business school graduates are comfortable with this technology but may initially lack the people skills necessary to be effective managers. Instead of developing these skills, they may hide behind the screen. Thus, we have the Internet productivity paradox.

Ultimately, top management is responsible for allowing organizations to become populated with desktop managers, and it is up to them to rectify this situation. There are two potential

solutions. The first is to screen applicants for management positions more closely to determine if they have people skills. Talk to their coworkers, suppliers, customers, supervisors, and anyone else who can shed light on their communication and other critical skills.

Second, effective training can help. In many instances the problem is not that a given manager is unwilling to manage effectively, but rather that the skills and experience to do so are lacking. However, as desktop managers learn to deal with conflict, grasp goal setting, understand the importance of integrating employees' goals with those of the organization, and institute annual subordinate evaluations of supervisors and act on the results, many so-called desktop managers will become managers that manage. While the need for subordinate perception of supervisory effectiveness seems intuitively obvious, thousands of organizations have yet to implement the process.

Knowledge workers demand information and personal interaction if they are going to succeed. They can tap many information wells through the Internet and in-house sources, but the interaction they crave, is that which their managers provide.

Jim Collins, author of the widely read books, *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*, recently related that important decisions in business are not about "what" but "who" (Useem, 2005). With the right people in place, an organization can usually figure out the "what." Arriving at good decisions depends on open debate, even conflict. Desktop managers, however, do not know their subordinates well enough to facilitate the kind of personal dialogue necessary to make this happen.

In closing, we must recognize that for the management field to benefit from the identification of the desktop manager, additional research is imperative. Clarifying behavioral characteristics and their impact on organizations is a needed step in the development of this research stream. Implementation of an actual methodology, however, may be quite difficult. Developing scales based on the three proposed behavioral tendencies -- self-preservation, conflict avoidance, and appeasement--may establish a typical profile. Just as we have come to a better understanding of impression management, ingratiation, and charlatans, empirical research is needed to find desktop managers, so that, organizations can avoid their long-term negative effects or the managers can receive training and a chance to improve.

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