

the TEN
COMMANDMENTS
for MANAGERS

GREG BLENCOE

The Ten Commandments for Managers
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INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of an effective manager is to recruit and develop a group of highly productive employees and work with them to fulfill organizational objectives. The question is: What steps need to be taken to achieve that outcome? *The Ten Commandments for Managers* was written to answer that question.

The big secret to managing employees is that there is no big secret to managing employees. The steps that managers need to take to do their job well fall into the realm of what most people consider to be common sense. But the discipline to execute these common sense principles on a consistent basis is what makes the manager's job so difficult.

The cold truth is that there are no short cuts to being a successful manager. You have to commit to being good and make a daily habit of putting these principles into practice. Managing employees is like anything in life, you get out of it what you put into it.

Because most managers probably don't want to spend their free time reading management books, this book was written so it can be comfortably read in one sit-

ting. It is not intended to cover every situation that you will face as a manager, but it will give you a foundation that you will be able to apply to your own situation.

Without further ado, here are *The Ten Commandments for Managers...*

COMMANDMENT I

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH HIGH QUALITY EMPLOYEES

“No matter how good or successful you are or how clever or crafty, your business and its future are in the hands of the people you hire.”¹

—Akio Morita

Co-founder and former CEO, Sony

Managers must delegate tasks and responsibilities because one person can only do so much. The question is: To whom will you be delegating? Will you be delegating to someone who is hard-working or lazy, polite or rude, organized or unorganized, competent or inept, talented or not talented?

Hire the Best Employee for the Job

For a product to succeed, customers demand that it be consistently excellent. At the end of the day, the quality of your product is largely going to determine the success of your business, and your employees play a major role in determining that level of quality. An ironclad princi-

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ple of business is that if you tolerate mediocre employees, then you tolerate giving your customers a mediocre product. It is unacceptable to have an “OK” or “decent” or “so-so” group of employees unless you find it acceptable to give your customers an “OK” or “decent” or “so-so” product. Therefore, you should figure out exactly what you want in an employee and then be relentless in your pursuit of somebody who is as close to that ideal as possible.

The extra cost and effort needed to find and attract the right person for the job is actually little compared to all of the indirect expenses that will accrue as a result of having a mediocre employee. What is the cost if an employee can’t get along with others? What is the cost if an employee does not show up to work on a consistent basis? What is the cost if an employee does not treat customers well? What is the cost if the employee makes mistakes all the time? What is the cost if an employee quits soon after he is hired? Therefore, you can either invest a little more time and money upfront for the right employee or pay a lot later for the wrong one.

Herb Kelleher, the legendary former CEO of Southwest Airlines, discusses a situation he faced that gives some insight into his attitude about finding the right employee:

“Some years ago our vice president of the people department told me the department had interviewed 34 people for a ramp agent position in Amarillo, Texas, and she was a little embarrassed about the amount of time it was taking

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*and the implied cost of it, and my answer was, 'If you have to interview 134 people to get the right attitude on the ramp in Amarillo, Texas, do it.'"*²

Finding High Quality Employees

The first step in hiring is to come up with a job description. The job description serves as the basis for determining exactly what you are looking for in a candidate. It should explain why the job exists and what job functions are regularly performed in the position. You should determine the requirements for the position in terms of education, job experience, skills, and personality traits. Then, prioritize the requirements starting with what is absolutely necessary.

If you have not been closely involved in that particular job, you will want to pick the brain of one of your employees who does have experience in that area. This will help you determine the skills needed to excel in the position. You should also make sure the job description is up to date, because some jobs evolve over time.

The job description can be a very valuable tool in advertising and interviewing for the position. If it accurately portrays the position, the job description can tell candidates exactly what they will be doing if they get the job. This will allow candidates to rule themselves out if it is clear they are not what you are looking for. In addition, when going through resumes or applications, you can use the list of requirements to weed out unqualified candidates.

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Once you have a clear job description and a clear idea of what you are looking for, you can begin searching for qualified candidates. The question often comes up: Where do I look to find high quality employees? The short answer is: everywhere. There are numerous ways to find potential employees. For example, they can be found through:

- ◆ Headhunters
- ◆ Temp agencies
- ◆ The company website
- ◆ Bulletin boards around the office
- ◆ Networking groups
- ◆ The local high school or college
- ◆ Your church
- ◆ Businesses where you are a customer
- ◆ Customers of your business
- ◆ Newspaper ads
- ◆ Groups with retirees who may consider part-time work
- ◆ Employment websites such as Monster.com
- ◆ “Help Wanted” signs you put up at a retail location
- ◆ Communication with former high quality employees who left on good terms and may want to come back after realizing the grass isn’t greener on the other side
- ◆ Previous jobs you have held
- ◆ Chamber of commerce meetings

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The key is to always be on the lookout for potential employees who would do well working for you. For example, Nucor Corporation employs a highly productive workforce and is the largest steel producer in the United States. One way they find good employees is to observe the construction workers when a new plant is being built. The best ones are recruited to stay on once the plant is functioning.³

When hiring for a position, you should give the people inside your organization a fair chance to get the job. Promoting from within is a good policy if the candidate is qualified. This increases morale because employees realize there are opportunities for advancement. If outsiders are always hired, your current employees may begin to think that they will always be stuck in their current position no matter how well they perform. Also, current employees know how the company operates so the learning process will be easier. In addition, this acquisition method is cheaper for you since you don't have to apply as many resources to locating and interviewing outside candidates. However, this does not mean that you should hire unqualified candidates just because they work inside the company.

Your current employees can also be very valuable recruiters. If they are working with other good employees, being treated fairly and with respect, receiving appreciation for good work, and having their ideas, opinions, and concerns heard, then they will speak positively about their experiences with the company. Soon, you will be flooded with job applicants. Remember, winners want to be surrounded by winners and play on a winning team.

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One of the advantages of getting employees through referrals is that the new hires will have a good chance of being successful and staying longer than the ones who are not referred to the company. The current employee can give them a crystal clear picture of what it is like to work for the company. This allows potential employees to decide whether or not they can function well in that environment. New employees who do not have the inside scoop may be in for a rude awakening if their expectations do not match reality.

Another benefit is that the current employee can help the new employee get settled into the company. This will give the current employee a morale boost, because it always feels good to recruit somebody to the team and help them along in the early stages of employment. In addition, the new employee will likely feel obliged to do a good job, because they don't want to make their friend look bad by not doing well.

When considering employee referrals, you should take into account who is referring the candidate. Remember, birds of a feather flock together. If a mediocre employee recommends somebody they know, then you should be skeptical. However, a recommendation from one of your star performers should carry more weight. For the most part, good employees are not going to refer somebody they do not think will succeed in a position. They also know that the performance of the employee they vouched for will reflect on them.

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Even though many employee referrals will turn out to be good candidates, you should promise your current employees that candidates they refer will be considered and nothing more. You don't want employees thinking that because they know someone who has the minimum qualifications that they will automatically get the position. You should let your employees know up front to not take it personally if you don't hire somebody they refer. Hiring somebody for a position just because you, one of your friends, or somebody else in your organization knows them is the wrong move if they are not the best person for the job.

Also, you should be careful about hiring employees from other departments within your own company. You need to be cautious about potentially burning a bridge with other managers by taking away their star employees. In addition, some unscrupulous managers might recommend a substandard employee from their department just to get rid of them. However, sometimes an employee who does not work out in another company or department may perform well for you.

Finally, if you feel uneasy about a candidate, you are usually better off not hiring them even if you have an open position that needs to be filled. It is better to take a little more time and effort to find the right employee rather than be stuck with a mediocre one. The old adage "measure twice, cut once" certainly applies. However, remember that no manager will always make the right choice when it comes to hiring employees.

Hire for Attitude, Train for Skill

In the hiring process, a general rule of thumb is to hire for attitude and train for skill. A person's attitude is so embedded and nearly impossible to change, while the skills that the employee needs to acquire can often be learned more easily. Somebody who is unfriendly, difficult to work with, and lazy will usually be a poor hire even if they have the experience and skills to do the job. It usually doesn't take long before they have a cancerous effect on the organization by bringing their negative attitude to the position and adversely affecting everybody they work with.

However, a candidate with the right attitude should be strongly considered because many skills can be learned in a short period of time. For example, if a position requires knowledge of a certain computer program, you can send the employee to a training class to acquire that skill. It would be a big mistake to eliminate an otherwise high quality candidate, because they do not have experience with a software program that can be taught in a one or two day class. The training costs are almost certainly much cheaper than the costs down the road of hiring somebody with a poor attitude.

Of course, there are limits to this maxim. Typically, the higher level the position, the less this rule applies. There is a point where the training the employee needs is too costly. And, obviously, technical knowledge is extremely important in a lot of positions (e.g. CPA, professional engineer, etc.). Therefore, you can't always just

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hire somebody with a good attitude if they don't have the skills needed for the position and they can't be acquired easily. But it is good general rule to keep in mind so you don't rule out a potential employee who could turn out really well with a little training.

When assessing candidates, you should be sure to differentiate between the essential requirements for a job and the preferences you have for the position. You don't want an otherwise good candidate to rule themselves out and not apply for the job because they don't exactly meet the preferred requirements. For example, sometimes experience in a certain field may be necessary. But a lot of times the employee can get up to speed on the intricacies of an industry in a brief period of time.

For example, imagine you are hiring a manager for a customer service call-in center. Here is a summary of the top two candidates from which you have to choose:

Candidate #1 - She is currently a manager of a nice restaurant and has been in that industry with three companies for a total of fifteen years. The interview went extremely well and your initial impression was confirmed when all of her previous managers spoke very highly of her. She said she has grown really tired of the restaurant industry due to all of the nights and weekends she has had to work and wants to make a permanent change to a Monday through Friday, nine to five type of work week. The only concern you have is that she does not have any experience in a customer service call-in center.

Candidate #2 - He currently manages a customer

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service call-in center that is very similar to yours. He has nine years of overall experience in call-in centers with three being as a manager. Based on his experience, this candidate is certainly qualified to do the job. But you were not overly impressed with him in the interview. In addition, both of his previous managers that you were able to contact gave lukewarm reviews of him. He also seems to jump from job to job quite often.

So which one would you choose? When considering this question, think about how you define experience. Has the first candidate had experience managing a customer service call-in center? No. Has the first candidate had experience managing lower-level employees in a high stress environment? Absolutely. In reality, although the industries are different, the skills needed to manage a restaurant and the skills needed to manage a customer service call-in center are quite similar. Therefore, the first candidate seems to be a much more attractive option once you take this into consideration.

One significant benefit of hiring for attitude and training for skill is that your pool of potentially outstanding candidates greatly increases. Here is an example that shows the benefits of being open-minded to candidates who have the right attitude but don't have the particular experience you want.

Paul Kopplow is the transportation manager for an upscale Denver hotel. He manages fourteen shuttle drivers who take the hotel guests to and from the airport. The hotel shuttles are large enough to require a commercial

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driver's license, and a lot of hotels compete for a small pool of qualified drivers. This makes staffing a perpetual problem. At one point, Paul was short three drivers and was scrambling to fill the positions.

Since finding three qualified candidates immediately was unlikely, he cast a wider net in his search. Before accepting the position as transportation manager, Paul was a shift supervisor at one of the local plants. About a month earlier, the plant was shut down and several of his previous shift workers were out of work. There were four people that he worked with who were standout employees on his shift, so he decided to contact them to see if they still needed a job. One of the employees had just accepted a position at another plant, but the other three were thrilled to have the chance to work for Paul at the hotel.

None of the three men had ever been a driver before. But at the plant, all of them worked hard, got along well with their co-workers, and never had any unexcused absences. So Paul hired them and put them through an intensive course to get their commercial driver's license. Each of them passed with flying colors and has been a standout employee on his staff for a little over a year.

Another factor involving the attitudes of prospective employees is to consider how well a prospective candidate will fit in with current employees. After all, team chemistry is important. You want to hire people who are qualified to do the work, but they also need to be able to work harmoniously with your other employees. A candidate

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who seems capable of doing the work of a particular job well can still be the wrong person to hire if they have a negative effect on your other employees.

Imagine you are hiring a person for a position that will support three college professors in various administrative functions involving their research. The professors are highly regarded in their fields, but they love to kid around with each other and are always game for the occasional practical joke. Some other people in the department affectionately refer to them as “The Three Stooges.”

Your first area of concern in hiring should be how well a particular candidate can do the tasks involved in the position. But a close second would be finding somebody who has the personality to fit in well with Moe, Larry, and Curly. If you have a candidate that seems to act very reserved and proper, you should probably not hire that person, because there will likely be friction between the two parties once they start working together.

Summary

The first rule of management is to surround yourself with high quality employees. The talent level of your personnel will have a major impact on how successful you are as a manager.