

# 8 Magic Traits of Being a Good Manager

*Shôn Ellerton, August 30, 2024*

*By following these 8 magic traits, you can be an excellent manager.*



What traits does a good manager have?

It's one of the most common questions I've come across in the professional world, and, undoubtedly, one of the most written about. So, why write about a topic of which there are thousands of already?

Because we all have a story to tell, and in my case, I write about practically *any* subject which comes into my head. With close to a million words published, I have been doing so for nearly ten years now!

But first, a little background. However, if you want to skip to the first trait, please feel free to scroll down the page.

This piece may be regarded as a follow-up to one I wrote back in 2019 titled, [\*Bad Managers Can Do More Damage Than You Think\*](#). I wrote that piece during a period of time my wife, a registered nurse, had to endure under one of the most toxic managers within the South Australian health service. My wife and all her co-workers suffered under an oppressive regime of bullying and micromanagement, the likes of which, seriously affected my relationship at home and at work. Having befriended one of my wife's colleague's husbands, it turned out that other relationships were tarnished with the same brush.

Not being content to let this one lie, I asked if it could be possible to have a talk with her manager, but on each occasion, I was declined the opportunity. And yet, the bully tactics continued. My wife was the only one with a young child at the time, and yet, her manager gave no quarter as to roster arrangements despite the

fact that she once had young children of her own. Her attitude was that if we allow any degree of flexibility, we'd have to do the same for all the others.

I requested an audience with one of the senior executives running the nursing program with my wife. Now, let it be known, there are risks in taking this approach. Well, there are risks in life, in general, are there not? But the current arrangements at her workplace were so untenable and unsustainable and none of the nurses dared to speak out for fear of being targeted, humiliated and punished.

Something had to be done.

We managed to have a bit of a chat with one of the senior executives who governed the nursing arm in one of the state's health jurisdictions. Keeping the rhetoric toned down as much as we could, we explained the situation to her. The discussion went well and, amazingly, not long after, my wife had been given far more flexibility on her roster, but not only that, her all-controlling micromanager had seemed to make herself scarce by taking a lengthy sabbatical and then moving on to some other position in the health service.

So, what do I know about what traits a good manager should have?

Basically, from the experience I had from being a manager myself.

Around ten years ago, I was thrown into being the position of managing a team of around twenty to thirty people within Aurecon, an engineering consultancy, in the field of telecommunications. The team consisted of a wide variety of people ranging from town planners, property managers, radio engineers, project managers, CAD experts, and design engineers.

I had amassed twenty odd years' experience in the field of telecommunications and therefore, had gained a great deal of technical and practical experience in the world of rolling out mobile base station sites for Optus, Vodafone, T-Mobile, and MMO2. The previous manager moved over to Aurecon's defence arm and I was encouraged to step in.

It was not an easy ride.

For starters, I was not Adelaide born and bred. Not even Australian. I had only landed on Australia's shores a few years' prior, and that was in Sydney. For those who know Adelaide are probably all too familiar with the cliquey-like nature of its denizens. It takes many years to establish relationships in a town like Adelaide.

When I stepped in, I could detect an air of disappointment from some of the more senior members of the team, and for good reason. This guy (me), turns up to manage a team comprising of mainly locals who had been in that team considerably longer than I had been. To be fair, I worked hard with that team for the last two years as a design engineer, and when offered the managerial position, I did question senior management why I was chosen rather than one other I suggested who should have been next in line. The answer was, I was chosen for my skills in looking at the big picture with a diverse range of skills rather than being tunnel-focussed and delving into details. I also have an acclaimed proclivity to sorting out systemic issues on a wider scale.

Hoping that it might pave the way to placing myself in the higher echelons of the business organisation, I took up the role. It took a little while to adjust, but after about a year or so, I began to formulate what the best traits a manager should have after running through some of my lessons learnt.

Let's start.

### **Trait #1. Feeling secure.**

There's nothing worse than an insecure manager.

The very first thing that happens to a newly-made manager is this. All the work which one did before is now taken away. Naturally, that often comes as a bit of a shock only to find oneself feeling more in tune with a feather duster than a valued member of the team.

It is not always easy to avoid the temptation for an insecure manager to try to understand what everyone else does *and* be better at doing it. This often leads to micromanagement, which leads further into mistrust.

Thankfully, I had never felt insecure being a manager simply because I had every trust that my staff knew what they were doing and were doing the job better than if I were doing it.

### **Trait #2. Be available and approachable.**

The days of managers sitting alone in an alcove or a separate room is a remnant of the past. Although, high-level executives are still usually isolated from the troops, but even this practice is becoming more outdated, particularly with new and emerging companies.

A good manager should spend a significant amount of his or her time with their team.

This was my approach when I had my team.

On a day-to-day basis, I walked around to *every* person in the team and asked how they are what they're doing. I got to know them well enough to talk about their personal interests and shared hobbies which really opened my relationships with them.

Another practice I adopted was being simply available.

Of course, I was busy, as was everyone else. But I *never ever* required my staff to set one-to-one appointments just to have an audience with me. I allowed my staff to approach me at any time if they wanted to talk to me. If I was busy, I'd politely say so, and tell them that I'd come and talk to them when I'm free. With many of the staff being out on site, there were, at best, ten to fifteen people in the office at any time. It's not a big number for any manager to cope with and if the manager is always swamped with a never-ending stream of administrative work, there is an organisational failure that should be addressed.

### **Trait #3. Prepare for being lonely.**

I remember the days of going out with all the team after work. The partying. The drinking. The festivities. Listening to all the others bitching about their salaries and how useless the managers are.

And then, at the click of the switch, as soon as I became the manager, I was, somehow excluded from all the out-of-hours social events. I was now, one of *them!*

No!!! How could this be?

But, you see, middle management is a funny place and especially lonely. The troops don't really want to see their managers turn up to their after-hours or lunch-hour socials, unless they, of course, arrange and pay for them. But neither are middle managers invited into the Sanctum Sanctorum of the executive establishment, in which, only the upper echelon members of the organisation smoke cigars and play golf together. Middle management really sucks in this regard because they are the neutral glue that holds the workers together with the commanders of the business.

Middle management can be very lonely but the best trait to have in this regard is to accept and embrace the loneliness. If you cannot handle being lonely, middle management is not for you.

I found, in time, once the staff are at ease with their management and reciprocal levels of trust have been earned from each side, middle managers become, again, accepted into the team. Not quite the same as before, but not nearly as isolated when first becoming a manager.

The worst mistake a newly-made manager will make will be to try to forcibly immerse him or herself into the social network of the troops. This is not only cringeworthy, but demonstrates insecurity.

#### **Trait #4. Knowing that your staff can teach you.**

Middle managers often have *the* most mundane roles of all time. In my case, it was passing down policy after policy to the staff. Doing performance reviews and KPIs. Filling in a great big spreadsheet with performance metrics across all the projects including revenue recognition, staff utilisation, and future pipeline work. Sandbagging monthly project finances to ensure that the executive receive a smooth trend in performance rather than explain the reason for having too many peaks and troughs. And, of course, dealing with timesheets and leave absences.

However, middle managers are often in a privileged position to be able to learn so much from their staff. And why? Experienced staff in their respective fields can come up with new and more effective ways of doing things which could be invaluable to the workings of the business.

Unfortunately, some managers, particularly those with an insecurity complex, can find that their positions may be undermined or even threatened and in response, tend to push back on suggestions or ideas made by a staff member. However novel or useful it may be.

#### **Trait #5. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your staff.**

Having casual informal one-on-one discussions with your staff is an integral piece of the puzzle of being a complete and successful manager. When I mean informal and casual, I mean dispense with the laptops, notebooks, and phones. Managers gazing into their laptops and making notes about staff during one-to-one sessions can often be intimidating and, frankly, uncaring. It suggests that the manager is

not really interested in getting to know something about his or her employees, but rather, to simply state, for the record, what was being talked about.

Effective managers will know the strengths and weaknesses of their employees and they certainly don't need something in writing, especially from the employees themselves, to elaborate on this.

**Trait #6. Being able to follow the rules that you set for the rest of the team.**

Managers who set rules for the team, and then, do not follow these rules themselves, will be cast as double-standard stereotypes, leading down the inevitable path of losing trust and respect with their employees.

For example, take the scenario of a manager that mandates all employees to come into the office four days a week with one specific day of the week designated as a work-from-home option. If that manager consistently breaks these rules, it is likely to escalate to mistrust in the team, especially if that manager is of the domineering 'my way or the highway' type.

The 'one rule for them' and 'another rule for me' philosophy can backfire. It is only through the instrument of fear that this may not happen, but this is only for the short or medium term, because, at some point, the system is likely to collapse when levels of dissent within the team rise to unsustainable levels.

**Trait #7. Being transparent.**

A well-running team is a team that is, essentially, running well without constant intervention of an overcontrolling dominant manager. One might have come across this humble phrase uttered by a manager, "I'm not here and I don't do anything".

There's a reason for this.

It is to suggest that a manager is put in place to keep the oils of the machine flowing and only intervene when something gets clogged up in the machinery. The manager is there to carry out all communications from above and to see that that they are adhered to. But likewise, the manager is also there to see that important feedback by the ground troops is delivered to those running the business.

**Trait #8. Never micromanaging.**

I'll be short and sweet on this one.

Managers who are micromanaging should not be managers.

Full stop.