



Management and Performance Associates – February 2011

Juggling managerial and technical tasks

This phrase, written by a participant on a flip chart, was compelling: “My day to day consumes me.” She meant that her technical tasks performed on a daily basis were preventing her from devoting time and effort to the management and development of her team.

The context was a follow-up session for a leadership workshop in which participants received staff feedback reports, six months after the original training program. By analyzing their old and new reports, participants were able to check if the data revealed progress, no change, or a decrease in their scores. Obviously, this participant hadn’t received good news. Frustrated, her face denoting fatigue, she added: *“It’s tough. I have really tried hard over the last six months, but clearly I did not get it.”* Seeing her concerned face, as well as the other participants’ faces, who were agreeing with her, we presented the concepts from a different perspective: **the apple juggler**.

We’ve all seen these jugglers, on a corner, in a square or at the circus. They manage to balance simultaneously, several objects in the air. This requires tremendous skill and concentration. Some even use their feet or head in addition to their hands. From the outside, it seems impossible to do what they do.

In a way, ‘managing and leading people’ is similar to juggling. You use your head—by being attentive and focused on the task, yourself and your team; your feet—by being rooted to the business context; your hands—by executing several competencies at the same time, without dropping any of them.

We developed this analogy with the participants by talking about juggling five apples as we manage and lead people. It was a powerful analogy to reinforce the idea that if one of them is dropped, well, that’s the beginning of a break in the process, with dramatic consequences. Therefore, be careful! Dropping one or more apples is probable. What cannot happen is to ignore that one is on the floor, leaving it there to rot. Sometimes, to pick up a

dropped apple and restart the action we need to stop all of the others.

In corporate language, we cannot put any leadership competency aside. If we succeed in this task the outcome will be visible to ourselves and to our team. Here’s how the apples are juggled:

Apple #1

Have a vision . . . communicate it

Your team needs to know where they’re heading—as a team and as a company. Therefore, if you’re not the one defining the vision and strategy for your company, it is mandatory to meet with your boss and clarify this issue. Then, translate your discussion into the vision and strategy for your group and communicate it to them. There is no other way to align your team. You will also make their work meaningful, even if their tasks are simple and routine. Every single staff member, regardless of rank, must understand the vision (what we want to be) and the strategy (how we will get there) for the company and for the business unit. Obviously, both levels should be aligned.

Apple #2

Establish and communicate performance goals and expectations

This equation has two factors: **goals** (oriented to quantifiable results) and **performance expectations** (related to observable behaviors which should be displayed by your team when achieving goals). In other words: the clearly expressed rules of the game, in order to avoid false assumptions. When talking about abstract concepts (e.g., teamwork) it’s your responsibility to clarify *what* you’ll be observing in each team member in order to know if the performance expectation is present or needs to be developed.

Apple #3

Involve, delegate and trust

This is perhaps the most difficult concept to learn. ‘Managing and leading people’ is not about telling them *how* to do their work. It is about developing them, making them more competent to achieve and exceed their goals, displaying synergy. Therefore,



Involving them means inviting them to say *how* they can do what is expected of them. The “*what*” and “*why*” have already been discussed in the first two ‘apples.’ It’s easy to be tempted to juggle a sixth apple (doing the task yourself), but remember that nobody, individually, is as intelligent as a team (collectively). Therefore, if you want to develop your team, delegate the execution of tasks to them, trusting their expertise. If still in doubt, keep reading. Apple number four will take care of any lack of expertise.

Apple #4 **Have frequent coaching and feedback conversations**

Delegation doesn’t mean disappearing from the scene. What it means is freeing your agenda to manage and lead your team. If performance expectations are clear and specifically established and we’re close to the team, seeing and watching their actions (or inactions) and the achieved results, then it won’t be difficult to understand where there are performance gaps for your team members. The most powerful tools to help them become aware of the gaps are feedback and coaching. Please visit our library at www.mapa-consulting.com.ar to read several articles on both topics.

Apple #5 **Plan the future**

Increase development? Promote? Reward? Let them go? Align task to talent? Whatever the action, please remember the old management saying: “thank your team for their efforts, develop their potential and reward their *good* performance.” Any other combination will be perceived by the team as unfair.

Juggling is not easy. It’s about consciously finding and maintaining balance as you manage your resources. It is doable. Any similarity with managing and leading people is purely coincidental. Take good care of your apples.

This month we invited Miriam de Samaniego, VP Tower People, from TowerBank in Panama, to share her experiences on this topic.

The key for me is to know the main purpose of our work. Without knowing, we are vulnerable to people and situations around us. I see my work as an interesting adventure, a new and challenging project, a learning opportunity, something different from what I have done before. Honestly, I often don’t devote much time to the day-to-day tasks. What this means for me is that with my right hand I’m doing things that add value while using my left hand for routine tasks. When dealing with routine tasks, I ask myself three questions: First, ‘Do I have to do it or is it something that has always been done?’ If I have to do it, then the question becomes ‘Do I personally have to do it or is there someone else who would benefit and learn from doing it?’ If the task is mine, then the question becomes ‘What is the best and most simple way to do it?’ Finally, there are things I simply decide not to do, and I choose to not feel bad about it.

As a leader, I devote a big chunk of my time to emphasizing which activities we will do in order to achieve the expected results. I also dedicate time to obtaining the resources needed for these tasks – and teaching my team to do the same. We need to be creative in this world of limitations. Many times we are blind, the answer is around us.

One of my favorite quotes is “Life is not about suffering.” I realize I use it often as my team now uses it with me. I like to be happy and surrounded by a team that is also happy. I like that they are focused and dedicated in their work (but that they leave at their scheduled time). I like that goals are achieved and that we are visible and recognized as we achieve our results.

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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