Upward Feedback
The Neglected Wisdom

by Dr Ronald Forbes, AFAIM

TODAY, while we say we are seeking full and open communication at every level, upward feedback is usually neither sought nor welcomed. And yet it is precisely in those organisations that have barriers of any kind between levels that the feedback is most necessary and valuable.

Useful feedback of this kind must be confidential. Any sense of risk changes the ratings,

An upward feedback process is a chance to break down barriers created by misunderstanding.

"...there would appear to be insufficient attention paid to learning from work experience... 'most learning must occur on the job'"

"...four sources of learning for managers:
• the job they do [work role];
• the people they interact with [work relationships];
• formal training; and
• formal education."

[taken from Enterprising Nation [Karpin report] April 1995]

therefore *the feedback must be processed by a trusted and impartial third party.* One concern is what the feedback is about. These questions raise a great deal of discussion and complexity. They have been answered by Peter Farey, one time senior manager with British Airways, who says, "We must measure behaviours [not competencies] as perceived by the team." This raises the question of the range of behaviours to be considered. Working through over fifty years of

leadership and management research, Peter Farey concluded that there are two ways generally used in determining Leader/Manager behaviour. The first is the one favoured by Blake and Mouton, and Hersey and Blanchard. It refers to the degree to which a manager is people focused or task focused. They measure people management versus task management.

The second way is that proposed originally by James MacGregor Burns, and refers more specifically to leadership. It measures transformational leadership [as opposed to transactional leadership (negotiating improvement)], and it also relates to both people and task. Making the assumption that managers must both lead and manage, Peter Farey used these definitions:

Management is about goals, strategies, resources, organisation, control, reward...

Leadership is about the future, new directions, risks, influencing, values... .

A map of behaviours

The framework he developed combines these four areas of behaviour, allowing us to consider two kinds of management and two kinds of leadership, as shown in *Figure 1*.

He used this to sort his collection of one thousand behaviours of leaders and managers, gathered over more than two decades, down to one hundred questions describing twenty vectors, in sequence. This became the Leader/Manager Map. And so we *acquire a set of descriptions broad enough to cover every cant behaviour of leaders and managers.*

While the Leader/Manager Map does not set out to measure competencies, it does include behaviour in all of the areas [and more] that

good competency models of leader and manager behaviour currently measure [excluding some very industry-specific details].

Since the map is used as a tool of management development, it inevitably leads to the development of competencies – specifically the ones required by the manager in managing their team in their organisation.

Giving the feedback

Each person indicates their view that the boss should be doing 'more', 'less' or 'as now' and their responses are computer processed to produce a map.

A dialogue is facilitated between manager and team that leads to the breaking clown of barriers of fear, misunderstanding and frustration.

The outcome of the process is not necessarily all change for the manager. It may also mean change for the team. Managers may be unaware that the pressure they are exerting on the team is slowing the development they want. And then again, the team may have to learn how to lift its game!

Feedback to the manager

Together the manager and team consider what is required to work more productively together. There must be action plans for both team and manager.

We have operated throughout the recorded history of organisations on the myth that managers are the best ones to tell their subordinates how to improve. Peter Farey's research has convinced him that it is the team's feedback that is the most effective. Neither peer groups nor more senior managers can ever actually know what it is like at the coal face.

Towards self-management

Managers faced with the process of upward feedback often feel distinct apprehension – what are they going to hear? Will they be criticised? Will it weaken their position with their staff, or in the organisation? One factor that makes the experience easier for them is that the process is usually started when their boss gets *their* confidential feedback.

Upward feedback does represent a new paradigm in management development, it does
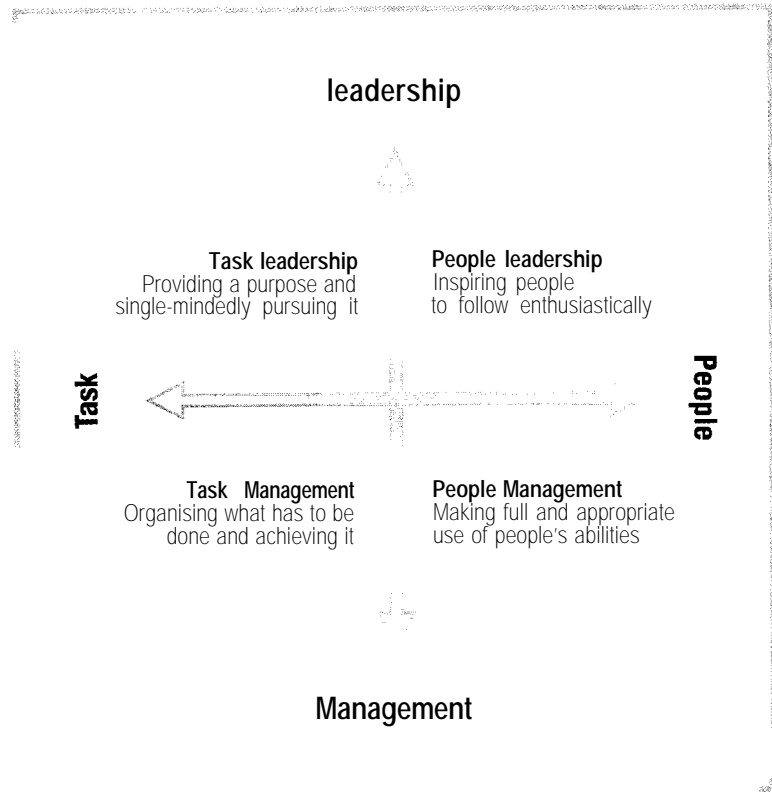
require a little courage but, in one form or another, the best managers have always been willing to learn from it. ⓜ

leadership

Task leadership
Providing a purpose and single-mindedly pursuing it

People leadership
Inspiring people to follow enthusiastically

Task

People

Task Management
Organising what has to be done and achieving it

People Management
Making full and appropriate use of people's abilities

Management

Figure 1:
The leader/manager map.

References

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