

Saving management from our obsession with leadership



Interview with Prof. Dr. Jim Detert
by Prof. Dr. Christian Gärtner
(people&work)



Prof. Dr. Jim Detert

is the John L. Colley Professor at Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, and Professor of Public Policy at Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. He has published widely on the field of management and leadership. His recent book is "Choosing Courage: The Everyday Guide to Being Brave at Work."

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Leadership is widely praised, both in practice and academia. Modern organizations, however, also need people – managers – who can deal skillfully with the everyday challenges of coordinating people and solving problems. Unfortunately, firms underappreciate and underinvest in the everyday management skills that they desperately need

You stated that business leaders often underappreciate and underinvest in everyday management skills. Why do you believe we often downplay the importance of good managerial skills?

Often, organizations assume that basic management skills can be easily mastered by anyone. But in reality, being skilled in tasks like hiring, coaching, and evaluation is neither intuitive nor easy. In addition, because all things seen as “leadership” have become romanticized, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the emphasis in development programs on things like strategic vision and executive presence instead of ensuring everyone can do the essentials competently. This leaves many managers and their organizations ill-equipped to deal with critical aspects of their roles.

In leadership trainings and keynote speeches, we often hear that there is a distinction made between leaders and managers. Can you elaborate on this?

The distinction goes back to at least 1977, when management scholar Abraham Zaleznik argued that managers and leaders are fundamentally different. He contended that leaders are visionary and inspiring, while managers are mere implementers. Though he claimed both were important, leadership was clearly described in ways that made it sound much more valuable. This distinction, although flawed, has persisted over the years, with many still valuing leadership traits over essential management skills. Back in 1977, most top graduate business schools emphasized management in their mission statements. Fast forward 40 years and by 2017, they overwhelmingly referred to leadership instead. A multitude of changes like this has had a ripple effect: The media tends to glorify visionary leaders and diminish the value of managers. This reinforces the flawed distinction Zaleznik made decades ago. Our recent study of over 2,200 participants revealed a lingering strong preference for leadership over management, which is quite alarming.

Why is this alarming? What's the problem?

There is nothing wrong with being a visionary, inspirational leader (although the evidence suggests many times that kind of leadership is not linked to positive organizational outcomes). But every firm needs people who know how to coordinate action, solve technical problems, and deal skillfully with the myriad human challenges that employees and other stakeholders face. And that is a tough job that requires multiple skills that are not easy or innate. If organizations downplay or ignore how hard it is simply to be a good manager, they will be in trouble before the vision can be turned into reality.

What does it take to be a good manager?

Based on decades of research as well as practical experience, we can say that there is a large array of important actions,

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behaviors and skills needed. To mention just three: Good managers design good jobs, they hold people to high standards after providing appropriate support, and they focus on fairness.

And what are good jobs? How can managers design them?

Work design isn't just about efficiency; it's about meeting employees' intrinsic needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence. Good managers actively

participate in shaping jobs, ensuring clarity, providing resources, and preventing job creep. They work alongside HR, not against them. When roles are clear and boundaries are set, employees feel competent and in control.

How can managers ensure that the workload remains manageable and motivating?

Managers need to continuously monitor roles and tasks. It's not just about adding



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tasks as the environment becomes more complex and competitive but also about re-evaluating and potentially subtracting tasks that are no longer relevant. This requires managers to stand their ground, especially when faced with unrealistic demands. Motivating jobs have task variety, clear success indicators, and growth opportunities. Good management is about striking a balance between structure and autonomy.

How can managers hold their teams to high standards?

Being kind and relational is crucial for building trust and meeting the need for belonging. However, managers must not shy away from difficult conversations because they are over-focused on being “nice”. Constructive feedback and addressing areas of improvement are vital for both individual growth and organizational performance. Avoiding these conversations is detrimental in the long run, including to the person not getting candid feedback.

Why is giving honest feedback essential in good management?

Honest feedback supports employees’ development and holds them accountable. It builds trust as employees intuitively know that managers who are reluctant to give sincere feedback might not be truthful about other things either. Withholding vital information that would support improvement is not beneficial, and it might even reflect poorly on a manager’s courage or respect for the employee.

Can you provide an example of when a manager exhibited courage in their feedback?

In a research project involving a national hospitality chain, a respondent shared that they wanted a promotion, but their

manager was honest in telling them they weren’t ready. They needed to develop certain skills first. While the feedback wasn’t well-received initially, with time, the employee appreciated the manager’s candidness, recognizing it as courageous.

Ok, then let’s talk about the third factor you mentioned: How can managers ensure fairness at the workplace? What dimensions does your notion of fairness cover?

Employee satisfaction and commitment heavily rely on the perceptions of fairness in the workplace. These perceptions are based on comparisons – how a person is treated relative to their colleagues. If an employee perceives unfairness, trust is undermined, and the employee may feel a lack of clarity, stability, or safety in their role. That’s why good managers don’t just avoid the obvious trust breakers like yelling insults, stealing ideas, or blatantly discriminating against others. They also do the hard work involved in creating and sticking to fair processes and holding people accountable for following them.

What measures can managers take to ensure fairness in decision-making processes?

Good managers prioritize clear guidelines for decision making, ensuring that everyone is subject to the same processes. They transparently explain the reasons behind decisions, even if they might be unpopular. They also establish avenues for employees to voice their concerns and give feedback on decisions impacting them. Importantly, good managers consistently enforce rules and processes, avoiding exceptions based on personal connections or other biases.

This seems to work in stable environments, but managers often face dynamics where things do not develop

as intended. And sometimes they have to adhere to new or changed instructions from higher organizational levels. How can managers handle unintentional harm or broken promises in the workplace?

Despite the best intentions, unintended harm can occur due to various reasons, like the need to keep some decisions confidential or dynamic environments that require change without fully involving those affected. The quality of management is reflected in the response to such situations. Good managers advocate for their employees, addressing their own inconsistencies and broken promises head-on. They listen, find alternatives, and if they can’t rectify a situation, they own it and apologize.

Eventually, good managers actively advocate for their teams. They don’t passively accept decisions from higher levels that unduly impact their people. For instance, a regional head named Karim was instructed to cut 30% of management positions despite his unit’s high performance. Instead of complying, Karim offered to start the cost savings with his own salary. This shows that good management involves the willingness to undertake some risk to advocate for and protect employees.

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