

Be Consistent ... But Flexible

Wayne Turk



I am a golfer. No, let me correct that: I play golf. To be a golfer, a good golfer, you have to be consistent. You have to be able to duplicate the same swing over and over. But there are situations where the same swing just will not work, and a good golfer can change his swing at those times. If you are under a tree, behind an obstacle, or in deep rough, for example, you have to be flexible and modify that consistent swing into a different swing. I know that because frequently I am in those places. Of course I ended up there because I wasn't consistent in the first place.

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Being a good manager is like being a good golfer. You have to be consistent the majority of the time, but you have to be flexible enough to do things differently in certain situations. Consistency doesn't mean being robotic. Let's cover some of the ways that you need to be consistent. These are not in order of priority because all of them are important.

Consistent Communications

Let's start with communications. As a manager, your prime responsibility is to get things accomplished, and you do that through people. Communication is, therefore, one of your most important management tools. Giving employees the facts honestly and listening sincerely are the biggest requirements. It is probably true that an employee's determination that you have given him all of the available information is more important than any specific information you can give him. Don't tell employees only what they have to know (or what management thinks they should know); let them in on everything that you can. There may be limits, but share all that you can.

On the other side of the communication partnership, you have to listen with true sincerity and interest to what your employees have to say. It builds trust and you may learn something. Show your employees they have your full attention and that you respect what they have to say.

Consistent Policies

Policies provide guidance for the fair and consistent treatment of your people. They should be written and available for everyone so that all employees (and managers) know what is expected, how to react in certain situations, and what the rules are. Policies may be as simple as a dress code or the preferred way to answer the phone, or as complex as overall human resources policies. Policies are best as guidelines rather than rigid and unchangeable rules, but we will get into flexibility more later.

Policies cross over into the external world, too. How to treat customers is one that is very critical. Contracting and vendor relations policies are important, too. The list could go on and on.

Policies may—no, will—change over time. As circumstances change (the economy, for example), as the organization changes or grows, as the mission changes, or as products evolve, organizational policies have to change, too. That isn't part of managerial flexibility; that is part of growth and change.

Consistent Processes

Using good, strong, repeatable processes is critical in project management and fairly important in any management situation. Processes can make the pieces of the puzzle fit together easily. Knowing that things are done the same way every time gives both employees and customers confidence that nothing is missed and that they can count on the re-

sult, whether that's a document, an action, a service, or a product.

Most organizations have many internal processes that are excellent. But be on the lookout for new processes or improvements that you can make on your existing ones. Look at other public and private sector entities for ideas, standards, concepts, systems, benchmarks, and processes. For the government, the Government Accountability Office is a great source of information on government best practices. There is no central repository for best practices for companies, but there are many sources, including the Internet, classes, conferences, seminars, books, articles, and so on. Don't reinvent when you can leverage on previously developed and proven work. Which processes you review and use will depend upon your duties and the organization.

Processes are a good thing, but they aren't the end all and be all for a manager. Processes are built from what has happened before and not necessarily from what is happening now. There is always the unexpected and the unplanned, providing opportunity for creativity and flexibility. Innovation and original thinking will be needed at some point in your management career. For most managers, it will be many more times than once.

Consistent Standards

A standard can be defined as the minimum acceptable level of performance. And the key word is minimum. By no means does this imply that any organization or manager should set low standards of performance. Set high performance standards that are challenging, but attainable and reasonable. Written standards are best.

As a manager, you have to set or enforce standards. Too much of a manager's time can be spent correcting behaviors that they never told their people were unacceptable in the first place. Setting the standards you want your employees to follow is the first step. It certainly doesn't hurt to bring some of your people into the standard setting process or at least get their input. Then ensure that everyone understands what the standards are. Monitor the standards that you expect your people to meet. This may mean metrics (measures of compliance or success) or it may mean just watching. Finally, if the standards aren't being met, it means correcting the problem with feedback, clarification, instruction, or even discipline.

When a standard is not being met, give the employee specific feedback on how it is being missed and how this hurts him or her and the organization. If the conversation has occurred before, you'll need to warn of the consequences of another failure to meet the standard (disciplinary action, loss of job, or other real consequences). Provide coaching and an action plan to help the employee meet the standards. The plan should include measurable results the employee must achieve. One good tactic is to require him to monitor

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his own performance with checklists and records, and bring them to the supervisor at regularly scheduled meetings to report on progress. Consistency is the target. Anything less should be grounds for termination. Employees who constantly have to be monitored and supervised are a drain on the organization.

Consistent Discipline

Most managers, at some time, will have to discipline employees. When employee discipline is done properly, it doesn't have to result in hurt feelings or resentment. When it's done poorly, it's often seen as unfair, and can actually cause more poor performance.

The manager who looks at discipline strictly as a punishment tends to apply negative sanctions, expecting those negative sanctions to have a positive effect. Sometimes it works, but frequently it doesn't. You need to consider discipline as an opportunity for the employee to learn. Work with her, but don't be afraid to apply the negative sanctions if the problem continues. The final punishment is firing. Don't be afraid of firing someone, but it is the last resort. Sometimes, especially with government employees, the firing process can require a lot of time, effort, and paperwork. Document everything, and don't hesitate if termination is the right move.

Be fair and equitable in how you apply your discipline. If you don't, you will be seen as showing—and you will be showing—favoritism. If you dock one person's pay for being late, that has to be your "standard" discipline for everyone. Rarely should you discipline someone for a first offense unless it is egregious, but you do have to acknowledge the infraction to the employee, provide explanation of your expectations. The fairest disciplinary systems act on accumulated rule infractions rather than single acts. To remind employees of the seriousness of breaking the rules, keep a written record of all infractions, including verbal warnings or discussions about rule infractions.

Consistent Evaluations

Evaluations have a number of primary and secondary functions. One primary function is to identify what the employee has done over the past evaluation period (a year in most organizations) so that he has constructive and positive feedback. Another is to identify strengths and weaknesses. That helps the employee build upon his strengths and shore up the weak areas. Evaluations are also used to determine monetary rewards (pay hikes and bonuses) and to identify employees with the potential to fill higher positions in the organization.

Where the consistency is important is in how you, as the manager, rate your people. There should be written criteria with specific goals and objectives against which the person's performance is evaluated (sounds familiar, doesn't it). While the criteria for rating individuals may be different because they have different duties and, thus, different goals, the objective way that you measure them against those goals should be the same for everyone. Again, you have to be fair and equitable. That doesn't mean recommending the same bonus for all your people. It means being totally objective. It means discussing the evaluation with each individual and getting their thoughts and feedback. It means being honest. And it means no favorites.

Consistent Treatment

Treat your people fairly, with respect, and treat them equitably. At the same time, treat them as individuals, which means possibly using different motivations or motivational techniques, setting different individual goals, and communicating with each in the way that works best. These are not inconsistent or contradictory guidelines. As long as you treat everyone fairly, showing no favoritism, you are doing the right thing. Act with respect to each. Acknowledge their individuality. Reward and recognize the good ones. Counsel, train and motivate the less-than-good workers to bring them up to standards. Don't denigrate or ridicule any of them. Be flexible, but fair.

But at the End of it All: Flexibility

Today when someone brings up flexibility in the workplace, it is usually about flexible work schedules (flextime), telecommuting, or work/life balance. Those are important topics, but the flexibility I'm talking about is the ability to be creative, innovative, and adaptable in your responses to people and problems in the workplace. It is finding the right way to work with, manage, motivate, and inspire each of your people. It is surviving—and helping your employees survive—in an ever-changing world and an evolving business environment.

Going back to my original golfer analogy, you have to find the right swing, the right shot, for each situation and you have to perform it consistently. And like a golfer, sometimes it's not going to work and you will end up having to try a different swing to get out of the rough.

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