Key Competencies of a Manager
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Summary

Do Managers Have High Risk Job? and What do Managers Want?

Introduction
Dr. Carolyn S. Dewa, Program Head of the Work and Well-being Research and Evaluation Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, described key factors associated with the work and wellbeing of managers. Dr. Dewa identified job characteristics associated with chronic work stress, highlighted job characteristics that place middle manager at risk, and discussed the relationship between work stress and mental health.

Job Characteristics Associated with Chronic Work Stress
Based on Karasek’s Demand-Control Model, there are five job characteristics associated with job strain: (1) Skill discretion, (2) Social support, (3) Higher autonomy than psychological demand, (4) Job insecurity, and (5) Physical exertion.

Job Characteristics of Middle Managers
A study by Schieman and Reid (2009) identified positive and negative aspects of authority. Potentially positive aspects of authority are: (1) Personal income, (2) Non-routine work, (3) Job autonomy, and (4) Schedule control. Potentially negative aspect of authority include: (1) Interpersonal conflict, (2) Work-home interference, and (3) Work hours.

Work Stress and Mental Health
There is growing evidence that shows work stress has a negative impact on physical and mental health. High work strain has been associated with a higher risk of mental health problems. There is also evidence that shows inadequate work conditions can lead to a greater risk of depression. Lower mental health status is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction for (1) Overall satisfaction, (2) Communication, (3) Nature of work, (4) Operating conditions, (5) Contingent rewards, (6) Supervision, and (7) Pay.
References


With these cases, we examined where inter-personal conflicts can arise and principles that enhance communication to avoid and address inter-personal conflict. This Convergence seminar focused on the key competencies of a good manager. The key point was to treat the team as a living, breathing organism that is constantly growing and shifting. To manage effectively, a manager should: (1) realize there are no cookie cutter solutions, (2) strive for a culture of openness, (3) be aware of the vibe in the workplace and (4) communicate even though it could lead to initial conflict.

**Hypothetical Case 1**

Jennifer manages a team of 30 people. One of her staff, Susan, has consistently missed 3-4 days of work each month for the past 4 months. Jennifer knows that Susan is struggling with mental health problems triggered by the recent death of a family member.

In an effort to decrease the absences, Jennifer and Susan come to an agreement to help decrease her absences. They agree Susan will check-in with Jennifer on the mornings that she is struggling with coming to work. On those mornings, they will talk about what work will need to be done that day in her absence. After a few calls, Susan is finding that as they talk, the calls are helping her come into work.

The other staff notice that Susan is missing work frequently. They are beginning to create their own records of Susan’s attendance. They bring their records to Jennifer’s attention. Susan is very aware of her co-workers’ activities.

**Panel Discussion Points about Case 1**

1. **In an effort to decrease the absences, Jennifer and Susan come to an agreement to help decrease her absences.**

   It is important to understand the difference between equitable versus equal. Good management practices do not mean everyone is treated equally because everyone is not the same. Conflicts may arise when managers impose cookie cutter solutions for all scenarios. Managers need to articulate the difference between equitable and equal treatment with their staff. Equitable treatment means that everyone has access to accommodation should they need it, how they need it.

2. **The other staff notice that Susan is missing work frequently. They are beginning to create their own records of Susan’s attendance.**

   There is an information gap. The staff are not being informed about what is going on. It is useful to review policies before there is a need to review them. For example, the manager could review attendance policies and accommodation policies and assure people that they have access to accommodation if they need it and how they need it.

3. **They bring their records to Jennifer’s attention.**

   Managers should ask themselves, “Why are people angry?” What are staff trying to communicate? Find out why people are angry. It is a good sign that people are willing to confront the manager about their frustrations. It shows there is a culture of openness. It is even better if the manager considers what is being said.
There is a power differential that managers are often uncomfortable acknowledging. Yet, it is important to remind the team that it is the manager's job to manage and to reassure them that it is being addressed.

Hypothetical Case 2

It has been several years since the manager joined the Department and worked with the employees to clarify the goals of the Department, roles and responsibilities and strengths and interests of team members. Since then the Department has produced several well-received publications and has received two substantial grants. However, over the last year, the manager has noticed that sick leave has started to edge upwards and one employee has been off for an extended period of time. People seem to take more time at lunch, and there seems to be some tension between some employees. In addition, the Department had to take a significant budget cut that resulted in one employee being laid off. Productivity seems to be slipping, People don't seem to be as engaged as they have been in the past and two employees have moved to other departments.

Panel Discussion Points about Case 2

1. It has been several years since the manager joined the Department and worked with the employees to clarify the goals of the Department, roles and responsibilities and strengths and interests of team members.

Managers create the culture for their staff. The key question is, “Am I creating the culture thoughtfully or am I just letting it happen?” It is important for managers to occasionally re-evaluate goals and directions, and communicate that to their teams. Conflicts may arise when there are different expectations.

2. Since then the Department has produced several well-received publications and has received two substantial grants.

Managers should not forget to praise people, telling that they have done a good job. Although a department gets a grant, people may not identify it as their success. Managers need to help individual members of the team recognize their role in department successes.

3. Productivity seems to be slipping, people don't seem to be as engaged as they have been in the past and two employees have moved to other departments.

There is a need for on going feedback from the team. It would be healthy to have a culture of openness so managers can set goals with the team.
Panelists

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Heather Kelly, Director of Student Services, School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto
Becky McFarlane, Co-Director of the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses
Cheryl Peever, Workplace Safety Manager, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Facilitator

Myra Lefkowitz, Manager, Health & Well-being Programs and Services, University of Toronto

Resources for Managers recommended by the University of Toronto Organizational Development and Learning Centre


