

# How to Be the Manager You Wish You Had



**By Melanie Lockwood Herman**

Executive Director

**Resource Type:** Risk eNews

**Topic:** HR Risk and Employment Practices

“There are two important days in a person’s life—the day you are born and the day that you figure out why.” – Mark Twain

During the past few weeks, I’ve finished two books that offer thought-provoking insights on managerial musts—and potential missteps—in the journey to a post-COVID-19 workplace. Becoming a better manager of people, resources, and projects is always on my daily, weekly, and life-long lists of things I want to do. Here’s a look at what I’ve learned.

## **Be a Thread, Not a Threat**

In her book, *Redesigning Work: How to Transform Your Organization & Make Hybrid Work for Everyone*, Lynda Gratton writes that “Good managers are the thread that connects people and work.” Managers should connect the members of a team to the purpose behind their nonprofit’s mission. Don’t focus on assigning tasks and finding fault when things aren’t done the way you might do them. Focus on helping your team harness their superpowers and find inspiration and joy advancing the mission. Gratton explains that truly effective managers let go of the hierarchical idea that “My team is here to make me successful” and embrace a team-based mindset that says: “I’m here to make my team successful.”

## **Embrace Radical Transparency**

In *How the Future Works*, authors Brian Elliott, Sheela Subramanian, and Helen Kupp describe a new way to think about the discipline of management and managerial roles. They invite readers to dispense with the traditional 5 spheres of management—planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating and controlling—described by Henri Fayol in 1916 in his book *Administration Industrielle et Generale*. They suggest that an outdated view of managerial responsibilities may be among the reasons that 75% of workers “cite a bad manager as the number one reason for leaving a job.” (See the [2021 Edelman Trust Barometer](#).) Elliott, Subramanian, and Kupp write that “The role of today’s manager is to do three things: inspire trust, create clarity, and unlock the potential within their teams.” Embrace radical transparency by sharing what your team might *want* to know (versus what you believe they *need* to know), conveying your beliefs and priorities, being vulnerable, and acknowledging ever-present uncertainty.

## Be of Service to Others

In a sidebar featured in *How The Future Works*, Tania Luna of LifeLabs Learning writes that “As a manager, you can manage process, you can manage time, you can manage resources. But you can’t control people. . . And the more we try to control, paradoxically, the less effective we are in getting the outcomes we want. So as a manager, it’s so important to think of ourselves as catalysts of great performance and ask ourselves, what can we do to be in service of bringing out the best in others?”

In *Redesigning Work*, Gratton cautions her reader against stereotyping “what it is to age and be productive, and by doing so closing opportunities” to older workers. She reminds us that while we design a better workplace for a post-COVID world, we need to focus on the needs and wants of staff across generations.

## Vanquish Faux Flexibility

Both *How the Future Works* and *Redesigning Work* explore the concept of *flexibility* in workplace practices and admonish readers to make an honest appraisal of their flexible policies and expectations. Study after study surveying every generation of workers remind us that our direct reports want true—not faux—flexibility. Faux flexibility is found in “arbitrary, top-down rules” about the new hybrid workplace. These rules may backfire because they infer that managers and executives don’t trust their direct reports to figure out the location and hours that will help them be most productive and engaged.

Both books reminded me of the power of asking better questions and the need to banish the thought that I might already have the answers. The question prompts filling my brain this week include:

- What am I doing to help my team feel connected to our mission and to the people and communities we serve?
- What will I do to help each member of the team find purpose and fulfillment in their roles through association with other purposeful, fulfilled people?
- What will I do this week to help each member of my team excel and feel proud of what they accomplished?
- In what ways am I being vulnerable with my team and acknowledging uncertainty?
- How am I expressing and sharing my enthusiasm about a new opportunity?
- How am I letting my team know what’s important to me; what I care about?
- How am I encouraging learning and sharing what I’m learning and hoping to learn?
- In what ways am I exhibiting ‘faux flexibility’ that undermines my trust in team members to do their best work where—and when—they see fit?

These books provide a great deal of food for thought on how to grow as a manager. But if you want to take just one step this week, try this: When you’re tempted to give prescriptive feedback, ask a question instead. See where your employees lead you. Odds are you’ll find yourself in some territory you didn’t expect—and that’s where growth happens.

*Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes comments and reflections on what you’re doing to be a better manager to the people who bring your nonprofit’s mission to life. You can reach her at [Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org) or 703.777.3504*