

11 Essential Traits of Great Managers

A Culture Amp ebook





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Introduction

Finding, keeping and developing great people isn't easy but finding, keeping and developing great managers is even harder. It's hard in my own organization - a technology start-up set to double in size over the next 12 months and I'm sure it's hard in yours too.

What employees and employers expect of managers has changed drastically in recent times. With new styles of management required, we need to revisit what we expect of managers, how we coach them and how we measure the impact of learning and development initiatives.

I hope this ebook gives you some tips you can use at your organization. If our team at Culture Amp can be of assistance please don't hesitate to reach out.



Didier Elzinga

CEO

Culture Amp

The world's most powerful employee feedback and analytics platform

A new breed of managers

It's tempting to default to a command and control approach to management, rather than giving individuals in the team freedom and autonomy. If managers aren't equipped with the right skills to allow employees more freedom, the concept can be intimidating.

Tech giant Google is a leader in the space of redefining the role of managers. They deliberately decrease the level of power and authority managers have over employees. "Managers serve the team," says Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt. Managers aren't focused on punishment or rewards but on helping clear blocks and inspiring their teams. One Google lawyer explains the dynamic with his inspiring manager by borrowing a line from Jack Nicholson's character in As Good As It Gets: "You make me want to be a better man."

Google don't just play lip service to these ideas. They genuinely believe that better decisions are made when multiple data points are collected and calibrated (and their research suggests they're correct). They're specific about the decisions managers can't make unilaterally including:

- Whom to hire
- Whom to fire
- How someone's performance is rated
- How much of a salary increase, bonus or stock grant someone gets
- Who is selected to win an award for great management
- Whom to promote
- When code is of sufficient quality to be incorporated into their software code base
- The final design of a product and when to launch it

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Managers serve the team.

Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman, Google

Project Oxygen

How Google identified the traits of their most successful managers

Although Google is one of the world's most successful organizations, they've taken a sometimes winding road to success. It was 1996 when Larry Page had the idea of downloading the entire internet. It took weeks, and the project was originally called Backrub. Organizing the internet and the backlinks to each site was a significant undertaking, and owners Larry Page and Sergey Brin weren't keen to leave their studies at Stanford to focus on it. They tried to sell Backrub to AltaVista for one million dollars, and having failed, offered it to Excite for \$750,000. It turned out to be a stroke of luck that the offer was also unsuccessful.

Google's first explorations into alternative ways to manage (or rather, not manage) people weren't particularly successful either. They'd always understood that engineers didn't like, or want to be, managers, so with a staff of 400 people, they relieved every one of their engineering managers of their managerial duties. One person was inundated with administration and people issues, teams became disorganised and the managers were quickly reinstated.

So, now they knew that managers were necessary. Google's Michelle Donovan, Director of People Operations posed the question: What if everyone at Google had an amazing manager? So Google embarked on a new project to understand what that would look like. Project Oxygen was christened in line with a trend of borrowing names from the periodic table. Donovan thought it was apt, "Having a good manager is essential, like breathing. And if we make managers better, it would be like a breath of fresh air," she said.

What makes an amazing manager? Google set out to find out with a thorough research process. They knew it was the only way sceptical engineers would buy into the results. They first identified the best of the best and the worst of the worst managers. They discovered that the teams who worked for the best managers were significantly more certain that:

- Career decisions were made fairly. Performance was fairly assessed and promotions were well-deserved.
- Their personal career objectives could be met, and their manager was a helpful advocate and counselor.
- Work happened efficiently. Decisions were made quickly, resources were allocated well and diverse perspectives were considered.
- Team members treated each other non-hierarchically and with respect, they relied on data rather than politics to make decisions and were transparent about their work and beliefs.
- They were appropriately involved in decision-making and empowered to get things done.
- They had the freedom to manage the balance between work and their personal lives.

They verified that managers had an impact on teams by tracking the performance of employees who switched between teams that had good managers to teams that had bad managers and vice versa. They consistently found that employees in teams with better managers were more satisfied.

In order to learn what good managers were doing that made them successful, Google conducted double blind interviews (where neither the interviewer nor the manager knew if the manager rated as good or bad). Managers were interviewed about their style using the same set of questions. From the interviews, Google identified eight common traits of high-scoring managers (see on following page).

Eight common traits of high-scoring managers

- 1. Be a good coach
- 2. Empower the team and do not micromanage
- 3. Express interest/concern for team members' success and personal well being
- 4. Be very productive/results-orientated
- 5. Be a good communicator listen and share information
- 6. Help the team with career development
- 7. Have a clear vision/strategy for the team
- 8. Have important technical skills that help advise the team

These give us a good idea of what it takes to be successful at Google - but do you think they're the right traits for every organization?

Manager effectiveness

How Culture Amp identified the most common traits of successful managers

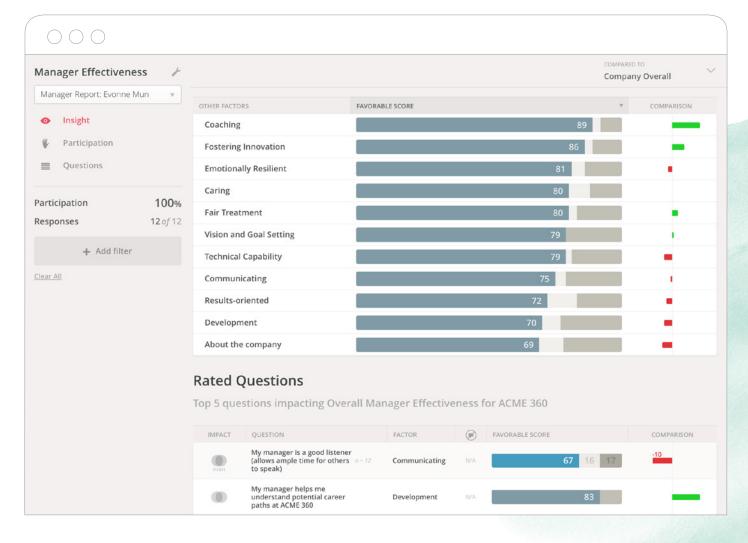
Project Oxygen identified the core behaviors of good managers at Google. You'll see they're not particularly surprising (Google was similarly underwhelmed by their findings). There are probably a few traits you can think of that aren't on the list. In looking at the traits of effective managers, our data and insights team at Culture Amp took things one step further. They conducted research with customers and reviewed current academic and practitioner research. Three more behaviors were identified: a manager's ability to lead through change (emotional resilience), treat employees fairly and encourage diversity (fair treatment) and focus on progress, not just results (overall effectiveness). As a result, the team settled on 11 traits of great managers.

"Going from being an individual contributor to a manager can be a big (and scary) leap, and managers need support - not just in the beginning, but as they grow into their own styles and refine their approach over time. Without feedback and guidance on what they can do to improve, managers are left to their own devices to figure things out, often at the expense of the people they manage. It's getting easier and easier to arm managers with feedback and coaching to boost their ongoing learning and development - and we see the rewards in more engaged managers, and teams, every day," says Myra Cannon, Insights Strategist at Culture Amp.

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It's getting easier and easier to arm managers with feedback and coaching to boost their ongoing learning and development.

Myra Cannon, Insights Strategist, Culture Amp



An example of Culture Amp's Manager Effectiveness insight report

The 11 traits of great managers

Caring

Managers who are caring take time to get to know the individuals in their team. They're genuinely interested in people's success and personal well-being and show this by regularly checking in with people on how they're going both at work and outside work.

"I'd consider speaking with my manager if I was thinking about leaving."

Coaching

Managers who are good coaches focus on developing the people they work with as well as getting the job done. They ensure they have regular one-on-one meetings with team members and encourage them to present solutions to problems, rather than solving problems for them.

"I regularly get feedback from my manager that I can put to use."

Communicating

Managers who are great communicators are good listeners. They allow time for others to speak. They have a clear understanding of the organization's vision and share it with the people in their team in a way that motivates them. They keep their team up-to-date on what's happening in the organization.

"My manager communicates a vision that motivates me."

Development

Managers who show a genuine interest in employees' career development acknowledge improvement (not just deliverables). They take time to discuss people's long-term career aspirations and help them understand potential career paths at and outside the organization.

"My manager frequently recognizes progress I make, not just results."

Emotionally resilient

How a manager behaves in challenging circumstances can have a significant impact on their team. Managers who are emotionally resilient are aware of how their mood affects others. They remain calm and productive under pressure and cope well with change.

"My manager stays calm when we're under the pump."

Fair treatment

Managers who value fair treatment will allocate tasks and set schedules keeping in mind people's capacity and development goals. They acknowledge good work. They build a diverse and inclusive team and encourage diversity of thought.

"My manager makes sure that my ideas and work are attributed to me."

Fostering innovation

Managers who foster innovation empower their teams to make decisions - and learn from failures and achievements. They don't micromanage people. They encourage innovative ideas and approaches and help people to implement them.

"My manager helps me take my innovative ideas from concept to action."

Overall manager effectiveness

Managers who are effective help people stay motivated to do their best work. They make the people they manage feel valued and supported. They feel they're successful when the employees they manage are successful. People willingly recommend them as a good manager.

"My manager is effective and motivates me to do my best work."

Results oriented

Managers who are results oriented ensure that performance standards are maintained. They work with team members to help remove blockers impeding tasks being completed and help the team get workable outcomes from team meetings.

"My manager helps me remove or work around things stopping me getting work done."

Technical capability

Managers with the required technical capability add value to their teams. They can roll up their sleeves and work alongside the team when necessary. They empathize with the challenges the team face and have the necessary skills to help devise solutions.

"My manager has the technical know-how to help our team."

Vision and goal setting

A manager ensures the vision and strategy of the organization is translated into an actionable vision and strategy for the team. They help people understand how their role contributes to the organization's success.

"My manager helps us set a clear strategy for achieving our goals."

Example employee quote



Hiring great managers

It's all very well to identify the traits we want to see in managers, but recruiting people with the traits we're looking for can be another challenge entirely. Google offers these tips for finding great managers:

- Assess candidates objectively. Have standard interview questions and a way for interviewers to calibrate their assessments of candidates
- Set a high bar for quality and keep looking until you find someone better than the people you already have someone who adds something new
- If possible, find your own candidates
- Give candidates a reason to join

You may already have standard interview questions. If not, it's worth taking the time to draw up a standard interview question sheet with follow up questions for interviewing managers.

For example:

Tell me about a time your behavior had a positive impact on your team. (Follow up with: what was your primary goal and why? How did your teammates respond?)

Tell me about a time when you effectively managed your team to achieve a goal. What did your approach look like? (Follow up with: what were your targets and how did you meet them as an individual and as a team? How did you adapt your leadership approach for different individuals? What was your key takeaway from this situation?)

One place to do some research for performance-based interview questions to add to your interview is the US Department of Veteran Affairs website. You might also like to consider performance-based hiring expert Lou Adler's advice to share questions with candidates before the interview, you can read more about his process here. Although we're focusing here on the attributes of successful managers, it's worth considering that many managers also operate as team members (across teams where they're not the leader) and experts, so there will be other qualities you're screening for to meet those needs, and questions around those should be included in the interview.

Remember the candidate is interviewing you too, so you want candidates to leave the interview wanting to work for your organization. Leave time at the start of the interview to introduce yourself and plenty of time at the end for the candidate to ask questions. They'll also appreciate the opportunity to walk through the area they would be working. Once you've decided to make an offer, you might choose to invite them to work drinks or a social occasion so they can meet the people they'd be working with. To avoid unconscious bias, it's best not to do this until after you've made a decision about whether to offer them the job.



Keep your performance evaluation away from my people development

There are a lot of calls of 'death to performance appraisals' at the moment and a focus instead on development and giving employees the feedback and resources they need to improve. The truth is performance appraisals are still useful in assessing how managers are tracking against expectations and revisiting salary, bonuses and other rewards. But to combine a process asking people to provide development feedback for a manager with a performance appraisal process is problematic, to say the least.

The difference in the kind of feedback and the depth of honesty someone is prepared to share about their manager (or anyone) changes depending on what the impact of their feedback will be. If they know it will be used only to provide learning and development opportunities they will be significantly more candid than if they think they'll impact someone's pay, bonus or chance of promotion. These phenomena are explained by economist Charles Goodhart in his economic law: "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure."

In the early stages of building our manager feedback platform, our organizational psychologists at Culture Amp highlighted that to elicit the most valuable feedback for development from an individual's manager, peers and direct reports, it's important that we avoid framing feedback as evaluation from the start. The communications around the survey and how people perceive the results will be used are just as important as the survey itself.

Google's Vice President of People Analytics and Compensation, Prasad Setty came to the same conclusion: "Traditional performance management systems make a big mistake. They combine two things that should be completely separate: performance evaluation and people development. Evaluation is necessary to distribute finite resources like salary increases or bonus dollars. Development is just as necessary so people grow and improve." You can watch his excellent talk Science meets HR on Youtube.

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Traditional performance management systems make a big mistake. They combine two things that should be completely separate: performance evaluation and people development.

Prasad Setty, Vice President of People Analytics and Compensation, Google



Fair performance evaluation

How we evaluate other people's performance at work is affected by many biases. Some are easy to identify and correct. For example, recency bias, where our assessment of someone's performance is impacted by the last few interactions with them, rather than their performance over the assessment period. Other biases are less easy to identify and correct - they're called unconscious biases for a reason.

It's widely recognized that peer-to-peer performance assessment is broadly inaccurate due to bias and subjectivity. Often the ratings people give reflect more about themselves than others.1

There's even evidence that we take into account the reaction of people whose reward we're assessing when we make a decision. For example, if we had the opportunity to explain that the organization had limited resources one year, and that had affected pay rises, would we perhaps award male employees more of a share of salary increases than female employees, predicting the female employees would be less likely to object? Research from Mauru Belliveau of Long Island University suggests we would.

Google's 4 tips for performance management

- Set goals correctly
- Gather peer feedback
- Use a calibration process to finalize ratings
- Split rewards conversations from development conversations

^{1.} S.E. Scullen & M.L.Mount, Understanding the Latent Structure of Job Performance Ratings, Journal of Applied Psychology, 2000, Vol 83, No. 6

Google set out to solve the problem of unreliable assessments by creating a scoring system. Each employee had a specific score - and there was pride in being a 3.3 as opposed to a 3.2. Of course the scores weren't that reliable and anyone from a 3.2 to a 3.5 could actually be performing at the same level. Another interesting thing happened - managers relied on their own opinion more than the scores. The system has since been retired in favour of a five-label scale: needs improvement, consistently meets expectations, exceeds expectations, strongly exceeds expectations and superb. To avoid biases, groups of managers sit down together to review draft ratings and calibrate. People identified as needing improvement are offered assistance and those rated superb have opportunities to share knowledge and are often promoted.

Having objectives and key results is an important part of understanding performance. Being specific allows people to prioritize their workload. Having a measurable stretch goal and a measurable result and keeping these updated provides an artefact to refer to as part of performance appraisal processes. (Culture Amp, inspired by Google, use a score of 1 for key result met, and 0.7 is considered a success.)

Effective people development

Many thousands of dollars and hours are spent on employee training each year, but it's not always easy to quantify its value. Our work at Culture Amp with some customers has indicated that the engagement scores of the teams who work with managers undergoing training increase following the training - but it's not yet a big enough sample to be conclusive.

As you know, the style of learning often has an impact on how effective it is. For many, workshops where people are able to practice and repeat a new skill tend to have a longer term impact than less interactive sessions. Google offers both internal and external training and has a focus on having its best performers teach peers. The company reasons that the loss of output from the star performer doing the continuous training is more than paid back by the consistently increasing productivity of the multiple employees they train.

Before you start planning training, it's important to understand how your managers are going and where they need support. You may already have results from an engagement survey of your organization or even their team - and that could flag leadership as a key driver, which is one data point.

To understand where managers excel and where they could improve, conducting a manager effectiveness survey will give you a clear baseline to work from. Team members can provide anonymous upward (180°) feedback to help managers understand how they're doing. Managers can see where they're excelling and what areas to focus on for improvement, and at an organizational level you can see what kind of additional training will have the most impact. You'll also be able to see which managers are strongest in specific areas, so you can tap them on the shoulder to help with training.



At Culture Amp, our organizational psychologists have spent many months designing a manager effectiveness survey. Similarly to Google, but with application to a range of workplaces in mind, they explored the question, "How would we describe an effective manager?" During the exploration phase they studied:

- The manager behaviors Culture Amp customers expect and want to encourage
- The eight rules to effective management that Google identified in its Project Oxygen work
- The critical factors impacting perceptions of manager effectiveness identified in our own data (from thousands of managers we've already helped).

They landed on the 11 traits we've walked through above:

- Caring Fostering Innovation

- Results-oriented - Coaching

 Communicating - Technical Capability

- Development - Vision and Goal Setting

- Emotionally Resilient - Overall Manager Effectiveness

- Fair Treatment

In addition to informing training programs, manager effectiveness surveys are also employed during times of rapid growth, when employee feedback indicates that managers lack core capabilities and when there is turnover of employees or managers.

The survey results will also inspire thinking about ways to develop managers outside of formal training. Once you've decided on areas to focus on, and taken some action to help develop managers, you can do another management survey to measure the impact.

A survey cadence of two manager surveys per year (in between one or two engagement surveys) is ideal, so long as you have time to take action on the insights before launching another survey.

Eight manager development ideas from Culture Amp customers

The initiatives you choose to implement will be informed by the data you gather in your manager effectiveness surveys. Here are just a few ideas some Culture Amp customers have used.

Manager lotteries

Pair managers across the organization so that they can meet over coffee to discuss opportunities and what actions their teams are taking. One company pairs managers who have similar opportunities (identified from recent employee survey results) so that they can learn from each other and break down organizational boundaries.

Unconscious bias training

Address bias in the workplace by training individuals to become more aware of their subconscious biases. One company has its workforce participate in unconscious bias training to become aware of how stereotypes affect behavior. All managers are required to go through the training. As part of the training, everyone has breakout discussions to talk about what they have learned about unconscious biases and how they might impact their workplace, employees and candidates.

Publicizing aspirations

Make career goals public within the company. At one company, employees display their career goals and objectives in a company Trello board. Examples of goals include moving to another department, or transitioning into a people leader role. Managers use this information as a conversation starter during one-on-one meetings. They also facilitate involvement in projects and introductions to people within the business that might help employees achieve their goals.

Better one-on-one meetings

Embedding a consistent practice of one-on-one meetings throughout an organization is a key component of performance management. At one company, managers and individual contributors are trained on how to run effective one-onone meetings. This company formed a team to help develop new content to help managers in their one-on-one meetings, including: what makes a great one-on-one meeting,

what types of conversations to have, a manager checklist, dos and don'ts, and a bank of questions to use to stimulate the right conversations. Geographically dispersed organizations may want to ensure there are one-on-one meeting champions in each location to assist managers with new training and tools. Executives should also be encouraged to role-model effective oneon-one practices.

Leading with authenticity and style

Support new leaders with training focused on leveraging their strengths. One company has introduced a series of coaching sessions for new managers to discover and design their unique, personal style of leading teams. The definition of an individual's style combines the aspirations and attributes of individual managers with the values and desired behaviors of the organization.

Fast feedback

Capture employee feedback more efficiently. One company implemented what they refer to as Fast Feedback quarterly pulse surveys. In the first survey they learned that employees desired more flexibility to be able to tend to work / life / family / hobbies, so they implemented a fully flexible work environment policy. Then in follow-up 'Fast Feedback' surveys they were able to determine how people felt about the new policy. Pulse surveys are also a great way to measure the impact of initiatives taken after an engagement survey.

Lightning presentations

Give your employees a formal opportunity in team meetings to share something important to them from outside of work. Start one team meeting monthly with a lightning presentation. People self-nominate to briefly present on something they care about or are interested in outside work. This can help people identify common interests and helps managers demonstrate an interest in getting to know people.

Footnote: The insights from Google referenced in this ebook were sourced from Laszlo Bock's excellent book, Work Rules!

Culture Amp

Are you ready to supercharge your manager's effectiveness?

We designed Culture Amp to ensure you can get the insights you need to help employees succeed. After seeing the progress customers have made using insights from employee engagement surveys, we're excited about what they can do with reliable feedback from manager effectiveness surveys.

We'd love to show you the survey. Get in touch and one of our people geeks will arrange a time with you.

