

Speech Ton Voogt , Shanghai 2010.

A speech for a group of top talented managers at the beginning of a week personal directed training.

Power?

Allow me to share a few thoughts with you about management. We hear lots of talk about the power of managers, about how highly they're valued and their big salaries, but the bottom line is that managers are powerless. No manager can achieve the results he has in mind, the results to which he is committed, by himself. He has to rely on the work of other people. You are totally dependent on other people for your success.

You are your instrument.

One of the instruments you have at your disposal, when you are persuading people to sign up to your goals and objectives, is yourself. Your own behavior. Behavior that is personal, in the sense of being attached to you, as an individual. You are the one who behaves in a particular way. How you behave is an important factor in helping you to achieve your objectives. In helping to persuade other people to make an effort, to dedicate themselves to achieving the goals you have set.

You and the different others.

You will be getting to know yourself better over the next few days. You will be looking at things from a new perspective, colored by a specific view, and looking at yourself and others from this unfamiliar vantage point. You will see similarities and differences. Other people will also see you in the similarities and differences. You will get a better understanding of yourself and of the others around you. So what comes next? Then you find yourself facing the real puzzle: 'Given your own predisposition, your own inclinations, how do you deal with people who have a different nature?'

A solution for ever?

The point is that given your own nature, you don't immediately understand what makes these other people tick, since their natural reactions are not the same as yours. But luckily, thousands of people have faced this puzzle before you, and have found ways of dealing with it. Not that there is a standard solution that you can simply learn and plug in, that you can apply to every person you meet. Unfortunately, that doesn't exist. The puzzle will always be there. And with each new person, you have to find a new key to open the door to communication. In fact, you even need to do so with people you already know. After all, they carry on developing. And meanwhile, you too change and develop. You become more mature. You understand more as you grow older, especially other people.

Lucky routines

And here comes the really tricky part: a solution you may have found today for dealing with the person called Smith doesn't work at all with the person called Jones. Worse still, tomorrow it doesn't even work with the person called Smith, since you have changed in the meantime. But fortunately, things don't get as bad as that in practice, since you make routines. You disregard some ways of behavior and focus on a spectrum of variations. Your standardized solution fits inside that spectrum of variations. Totally effective and efficient. After a while, the routine turns out to be obsolete, it no longer works, and you have to start again, devise a new solution.

Understand and be aware.

Since as managers we are so dependent on our staff to achieve success, every step we take towards modern self-knowledge must help us to acquire a better understanding of what makes individual members of our staff tick. The better I understand my staff as individuals, and the better I understand myself, the easier it will be to find the right solutions.

I failed, once.

The main thing I had to learn when I was having difficulty getting my staff interested, getting them enthusiastic about particular goals, or to perform tasks in a particular way, was not to use my power over them to impose my will. Not to deprive them of rewards or to punish them indirectly by ignoring, excluding or humiliating them. It just didn't work. In fact, it always produced the opposite result. It made my staff into slaves: when I was there, they did what I wanted. As soon as I was out of the way, they did nothing. I didn't achieve my goals, or only barely. They would give me one excuse after the other for everything that went wrong. It really got me down. So what's the right way to get things back on line?

The idea of myself as an instrument in achieving success as a manager was not always easy. In fact, it proved an obstacle at least as often as it helped me. I wish you more luck with yourselves than I had dealing with my own character. I still have to work really hard to behave in ways that are useful and effective. To find ways of persuading others to sign up to, and to strive to achieve, objectives that I have defined. Luckily, there's hope even for me. And of course, there's plenty of hope for you!

