

A personal view of The Fire Fighting Manager

by Cornerstone Consultant, Nick Belcher.



During my work with organisations that are moving away from a hierarchical culture to an empowered one, I have met successful managers who can work on many jobs at the same time. I call them Fire Fighting Managers.

They are energetic “hands on” people who enjoy pressure, move fast, solve problems and they get a “Buzz” from working in this way. They are valuable to any organisation and are often promoted.

My observations of these managers reveal common characteristics and possible “blind spots” in the way they work.

Task mesmerisation

When managers have many tasks to complete their main focus is fast planning and urgent action. “People” issues can be overlooked and important factors affecting team performance missed. With little time to delegate they can find themselves caught up in a viscous circle of high workload.

What went wrong?

Over analysis of difficulties can lead to valuable and successful practices being overlooked and the insidious growth of a blame culture. Focusing only on mistakes and errors has a negative impact on people’s confidence and morale. Interestingly, the English language promotes fault reviews - “We learn by our mistakes” and “trial and error”.

Stress- What stress?

Positive stress is regarded as a positive factor that can enhance energy, motivation and success. On the other hand managers have often explained to me how they experience “Burn out” when the workload just gets too much. Then positive stress becomes negative stress with all its potential health problems.

Hearing or listening?

When the pressure is on, the Fire Fighting Manager just wants to get on with it. They are good at issuing orders. They may not listen enough to others or invite them to express their views. This can result in people feeling uninvolved and undervalued.

Competition motivates

I have seen managers proudly operate on an “I win you lose” basis. While some competition is healthy, it can, if overdone quickly promote a culture where failure is punished rather than analysed. Then people become reluctant to put ideas or opinions forward for fear of getting their heads chopped off ! Achieving real team working becomes just a fantasy.

If unchecked these characteristics can lead Fire Fighting Managers into difficulties, especially when they are promoted to more senior management positions.

One pressure that forces managers to address their skill set is the establishment of an organisational “strategic change programme”. Projects from these programmes can cause serious task over load and have been described to me as workload “black spots”.

The question many managers raise is – “How do I incorporate strategic change programme projects into the day job?”

There’s no easy answer to this. But certainly one option is to implement skill development. Not ordinary training, but advanced coaching sessions for groups or individuals. Designed specifically to clear “blind spots”, they furnish managers the skills to work through others, with a greater ability to cope with increased workloads.

I believe that Fire Fighting Managers have even more to offer and should be nurtured and given support to do so. By becoming aware of their “blind spots” and taking action to address them, they can improve their own performance and, most importantly, influence others to do the same.

As people see their managers adopting new ways of working, becoming less task mesmerised and more responsive to people around them - then best practice behaviours and an ability to manage change will gradually spread; to the benefit of the individual, team and organisation.

In order to address managers’ possible “blind spots”, Cornerstone’s advanced coaching programmes and 360 degree feedback process can help them to:-

Master purposeful leadership styles: develop keen listening and observing skills to create cohesive teams with a common purpose.

Prioritise workloads: explore options with line managers and teams so that work can be more readily delegated.

Set aims and plans: ensure they are clearly understood and robust enough for teams to implement even if the manager was run under a bus !

Review for success, results and progress: uncover successful practices and move away from a “what went wrong” analysis.

As Fire Fighting Managers are all unique so are our programmes. Look for Fire Fighting Managers in your organisation and release their potential.

For more details about Cornerstone’s services please call Nick Belcher

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