Management Maxims for the New Millennium

By C.W. Von Bergen, Barlow Soper, and Robert Masters

Executive Summary
Managing organizational behavior effectively in the new millennium requires supervisors to apply principles that were effective in the old millennium. After reviewing organizational behavior and management literature and incorporating perceptions, insights, and realizations gained from more than 25 years of experience as practitioners and academicians, the authors have codified these guidelines into seven maxims appropriate for the new millennium.

The passing of the second millennium and the beginning of the third may be most remembered for its earthshaking advances in the hard sciences and technology. Unfortunately, such breakthroughs do not appear to be on the horizon in business and management. Nevertheless, a number of practices have been identified that qualify as management tenets for the new millennium.

1. **Disruptive people can be an asset.** Unruly people are like the irritating grains of sand in an oyster that every now and then produce a pearl. These individuals precipitate breakthroughs, often by forcing an uncomfortable examination of long-standing assumptions. Their favorite question is, Why? When everyone else is too frightened or lethargic to inquire, they speak out.

   These individuals are change agents. And change agents are not supposed to be popular. They are supposed to foment unrest that leads to change — seldom an easy or comfortable undertaking. Original thinkers — disruptive people unafraid to challenge conventional wisdom — are a powerful asset. An important tenet derived from this principle is that to be an effective manager one should always “stay in with the outs,” because such people guide the future.

2. **Mirror management is a good practice.** Before reprimanding employees, we must look in the mirror to see how we as managers may have been a causal factor in workers’ questionable performance.

   A fundamental psychological principle, the law of effect, holds that behavior is a function of its consequences. Behavior that is reinforced tends to increase in occurrence.
while behavior that is punished decreases. Managers tell us they religiously follow this law by rewarding good performance and punishing "bad behavior." Managers, however, frequently violate this principle. For example, Figure 1 illustrates that someone who is good at completing reports is given all the reports to do, which is perceived as punishment. You can be sure that in the future this typist will change behavior to avoid this consequence by reducing the quality of the reports.

Alternatively, supervisors sometimes unwittingly reward poor performance. For example, suppose an employee who doesn't like to work weekends becomes disruptive during weekend shifts. If the supervisor remedies the problem by not assigning the employee to weekend shifts, the supervisor has shown the employee that the way to get what he wants is to be troublesome. Inappropriate consequences will almost certainly result in unacceptable employee performance, yet supervisors quickly blame and criticize employees for poor performance without considering their own roles in the situation.

3. **A little fear isn't all bad.** Fear caused by a manager's capricious whims or self-serving delusions of grandeur have absolutely no place in the business world. However, a degree of legitimate fear can have utility; for example, the fear of letting down one's team, of bringing embarrassment on oneself or one's family, or the very rational fear of what the competition will do if a company lets down its guard. That kind of fear should never be ignored or sublimated because if it is, we can be assured that an even bigger fear will soon arise to take its place: fear of survival. Fear keeps an organization awake, on its toes, and a little nervous — all of which protect it from becoming apathetic. Moderate levels of conflict are necessary ingredients of a healthy company, just as a moderate degree of stress results in maximum employee performance.

4. **Forget the Golden Rule.** "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" is really not the best policy; instead, treat others as they want to be treated. An old fable, published in a 1969 issue of *International Development Review*, vividly dramatizes the negative consequences of following the Golden Rule and is an appropriate metaphor for the problems that can arise when supervisors strictly follow this well-intended axiom:

Once upon a time, there was a great flood. Two creatures were affected by the flood: a monkey and a fish. The monkey, being agile and experienced, was lucky enough to scramble up a tree and escape the raging waters. As he looked down from his safe perch, he saw the poor fish struggling against the swift current. With the best of intentions, he reached down and lifted the fish from the water. The result was inevitable.

Just as the monkey assumed that the fish's needs were the same as his and behaved accordingly, many managers assume that their employees think, feel, and want to be treated as they do. Such well-intentioned behavior frequently results in unfortunate circumstances.

The tendency to assume that others share our opinions, feelings, and behavior is called the false consensus effect, according to an article by R.M. Dawes published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* in 1989. We tend to believe that others hold similar political opinions, find the same movies amusing, and think that baseball or football is the distinctive American game. The Salvadoran saying, "The
thief thinks that everyone else is a thief,” applies. False consensus bias can serve as justification for imposing one’s beliefs on others.

We must accept that people are individuals. They perversely insist on behaving like human beings. Each works his or her way, not our way. And each is entitled to work his or her way. The first secret of managerial effectiveness is to understand the people we work with and depend on so that we can make use of their strengths and their ways of working. Some people like chocolate ice cream while others prefer strawberry. Just because we may like vanilla does not mean others must, too.

5. It’s all right to be fussy. In a best-selling book, Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff...and It’s All Small Stuff, the author explains why we should not let little things take over our lives. In one’s personal life, he is probably correct. We accept little things that cannot be changed — weather, traffic, minor inconveniences — and try to change things that can be altered.

But professionally, you should sweat the small stuff. Being detail-oriented, punctual, and orderly; making no typos; and speaking and dressing properly are important. Architect Mies van der Rohe said “God is in the details.” If we take his aphorism seriously, getting things accomplished requires attending to the small aspects of a job. Doesn’t the big picture matter more than details? It matters, but not more than the small picture. As the saying goes, “Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle.”

Be a master of the mundane. According to the book Think Like a Champion: Building Success One Victory at a Time, “With so many people having their eyes on the same prize, tending to all the little stuff easily could provide the slight edge you need. It very well could be the margin between winning and losing.”

6. Develop a bias for action. Successful organizations and managers in the new millennium will develop a bias for action and an unrelenting focus on deeds, execution, and results. Do not let talk substitute for action. One of the main barriers to turning knowledge into action is the tendency to treat talking about something as equivalent to doing something. Figure 2 illustrates some of these barriers.

Talking about what should be done (e.g., discussions, meetings, conferences, and presentations) or talk turned into writing (e.g., mission or vision statements, lists of organizational values and philosophies, one-year operational plans, or five-year strategic plans) are not substitutes for action. Rather, they can guide and motivate action. Indeed, rhetoric is frequently an essential first step toward taking action. But just talking or writing about what to do is not enough. Something has to get done, and someone has to do it. Taking action and having an action orientation are still necessary for anything to be accomplished. Knowing too much and doing too little is a recipe for disaster. “Ready, fire, aim” will be the slogan of effective organizations in the future. The idea of firing, then aiming — or doing, then planning — helps to establish a cultural tone in which action is valued and talk without action is unacceptable.

A corollary to this maxim is that truly successful managers in the third millennium must be proactive — that is, they must transform or surmount organizational environments rather than adjust to them. They must be the people who change the world rather than those who adapt to it. Proactive people scan for opportunities, show initiative, take action, and persevere until they reach closure by bringing about change, according to an article by T.S. Bateman and J.M. Crant published in the Journal of Organizational Behavior in 1993. Proactive people are pathfinders who change their organization’s mission or find and solve problems. They take it upon themselves to have an effect on the world around them. People who are not proactive exhibit the opposite patterns — they fail to identify, let alone seize, opportunities to make change. They show little initiative and rely on others to be forces for change. They passively adapt to, and even endure, their circumstances.

7. Be courteous and don’t take pride in your ignorance. Rudeness in the workplace — yelling at subordinates, snubbing co-workers, or withholding information — is on the rise and it is costing organizations dearly. As J.C. McCune explains in “Civility Counts,” an article published this year in Management Review, people on the receiving end of such incivilities work less productively and have less commitment to their employers. Manners — simple things like saying “please” and “thank you” and knowing a person’s name or
asking about her family — enable two people to work together whether they like each other or not.

Bright people, especially bright young people, often do not understand this. Some people think that being bright is a substitute for interpersonal knowledge and are contemptuous of other fields of learning. First-rate engineers, for instance, tend to take pride in not knowing anything about people. Human beings, they believe, are much too disorderly for the fine-tuned engineering mind. Human resource professionals, by contrast, often pride themselves on their ignorance of elementary accounting or of quantitative methods altogether. Expatriate executives, on the other hand, often believe their business skills are adequate for success and haughtily dismiss the importance of learning the history, culture, and traditions of a country where they are expected to perform — only to find that their superb skills produce inferior results on different soil. Taking pride in such ignorance is self-defeating. We must acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to fully realize our strengths and then apply that knowledge politely.

Closely associated with the arrogance inherent in this last principle is the "not invented here" syndrome. This is the belief that ideas, systems, procedures, and methods developed in a particular discipline are not appropriate or relevant to another knowledge area, in part because they were not fashioned in that specific field of knowledge. Specialists in educational leadership, for example, are frequently loath to consult the leadership literature in business management — and vice versa — in large part because of the intellectual egotism of specialists in both knowledge areas. Likewise, mental health professionals in medicine and psychology are reluctant to consult one another's research, with the result that psychiatrists frequently ignore the psychological literature and clinical psychologists often dismiss the medical literature related to psychiatry.

In conclusion
Managing organizational behavior productively in the new millennium requires managers and supervisors to apply principles and practices found effective in the old millennium. While this list of organizational dicta is not exhaustive, these maxims are appropriate for management in the third millennium.

For further reading
(See page 34 for ordering information.)
Carlson, R., Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...And It's All Small Stuff, Hyperion, 1997.


Fournier, E., Why Employees Don't Do What They're Supposed to Do and What to Do About It, Liberty Hall Press, 1988.


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