

Jam-ups: When the boss covets your job

'Manager doesn't have a clue what I do'

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Financial Post

Wednesday, September 21, 2005

"My manager drives me crazy. He's always interfering -- breathing down my neck and checking my work, even though there's almost never anything wrong with it. And sometimes, I'm sitting twiddling my thumbs while he does work that I could easily do. I often wonder why he hired me."

Sound familiar? If you've ever been in a situation such as this, you've experienced what we call a jam-up, where a manager and direct report are competing for the same work. You're certainly not alone -- our research shows that, on average, 38% of roles are jammed with their managers -- and it's probably not your fault or your manager's fault, but it is destructive. At its least destructive, a jam-up is experienced as the manager adding little value to the employee's work but not really getting in the way ("Oh, that's my manager, but he and I work together more as colleagues than anything else."). At worst, jam-ups lead to frustration, tense manager/employee relationships, poor morale, duplicated work, mismatched compensation and high turnover.

On the other hand, 18% of employees are in a gap, in which the manager is working at too high a level to provide effective support. Someone experiencing a gap might describe their work situation something like this:

"My manager doesn't have a clue what goes on in my job. She thinks I ask too many questions and isn't interested when I try to explain what I have to go through to get my work done. She often skips over the details when she's giving me projects, and my interpretation of what she wants doesn't always match hers."

Too large a gap between a manager's work and a direct report's work often leaves the direct report feeling stressed, inadequate and overwhelmed. The manager feels frustrated and "pulled down into the weeds," feeling obliged to neglect vital work to fill the gap -- and may blame the employee.

Effective manager/employee relationships are crucial for employee and company success. The tragedy is that 56% of roles in such relationships (from the front line all the way up to the CEO) are either poorly designed or filled with people with the wrong level of capability. The cost to organizations and the individuals concerned can be tremendous.

Employees need managers who can add value. Managers must be close enough to their employees to understand their work and their needs, but must not compete for that work. Instead, the manager's work should encompass a somewhat broader scope and have a longer-term focus than that of the direct report -- but not so much that the manager loses touch. The key is determining the line between too close and too far.

A critical task for all managers is to build an effective organization below them, yet few managers understand the principles of organization design and how to structure work effectively. With the best of intentions, managers often structure around their key people rather than around the work that needs to get done. Hence, "Jo is very bright, and she did some public relations work once. I know we

hired her as our receptionist but let's have her handle this publicity campaign. If she does it well, we'll just make it part of her role." Or, "I've noticed Erik has been getting bored lately. He's got valuable IT skills that I don't want to lose, so I think I'll add some more complex project work into his role to keep him challenged." Although intentions are good, designing roles around people (rather than defining the work then selecting the right people for roles) leads to jam-ups and gaps and their attendant problems -- and it becomes harder to fill those roles if those individuals leave.

Nearly all employees come to work intending to do their best but frequently, things get in the way. Good people can make poorly designed manager/employee relationships work. However, designing the relationships so managers are neither too far from nor too close to their employees will create the conditions for good people to be great.

Take the example of a large call centre in a major Canadian bank that undertook an organization design project with a focus on eliminating jam-ups and gaps and clarifying role accountability. Within two years, it had moved from a command-and-control mentality with high turnover, low productivity and poor morale to a creative, energized, high-performing organization.

While making your organization the best it can be is not as simple as eliminating jam-ups and gaps, doing so will take you a long way toward improving employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction and financial return.

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