Fundamental Supervisory Practices
Center for Public Leadership and Governance
UNC-School of Government
November 17, 2020

<u>Topics covered in today's session:</u>

- Review components of a basic communication model and why these are important in effective communication.
- Discuss the importance of "I" messages and when to use them.
- Identify and practice using skills of active listening and asking open-ended questions.
- Explore the ladder of inference and its impact on effective communication.

Active Listening

Communication between supervisors and employees can be improved through a technique called Active Listening. Many times we listen until we think of a response and then stop listening and start trying to make our own point. People sense when this happens in interactions and it creates competitive rather than collaborative environments.

Ways you can active listen	Purpose	Examples
1. being attentive	encourages the person to continue speaking	silence, uh-huh nods of understanding good eye contact
2. restating	paraphrasing what the person said or felt in your own words	"you felt frustrated about that because…. **is that right?"**
3. clarifying	to help you get facts lets person know you heard what he/she said	"as I understand it..." " I heard you say…" **"…is that correct?"**

Restating and clarifying are techniques to check to see if you fully understand and to let the other person know that you have heard their concern.

4. reflecting	helps other person recognize and express feelings, reflect empathy, and to check your inferences	"I sense that you feel____" "your voice sounds--" "you looked (Emotion) when said that" **"Is that accurate?"**

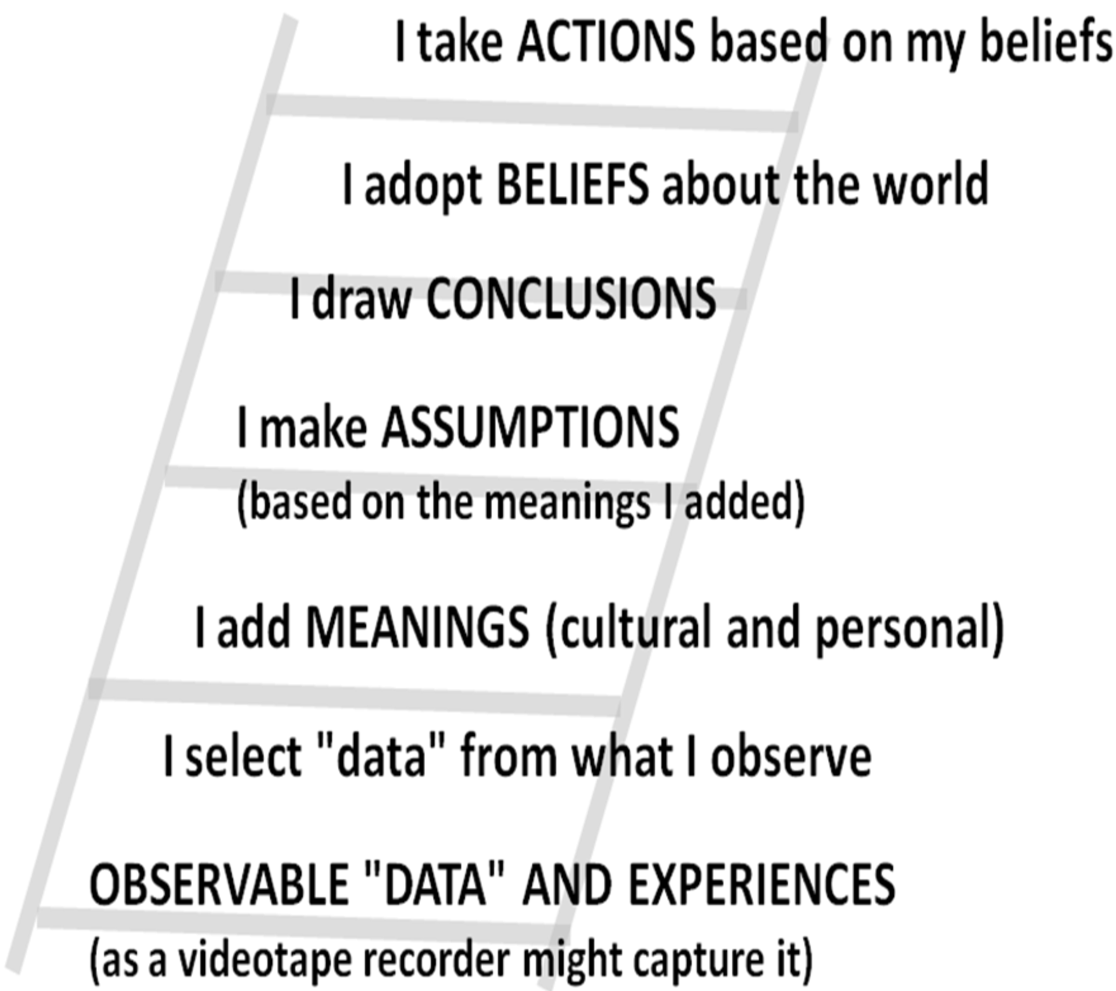
Reflecting is a key skill in emotional conversations. Reflecting back the emotional tone of the message along with restating or clarifying the verbal message is one of the most powerful ways to display empathy and understanding.

5. probing	brings up new information	I'm unclear about something, could you **"tell me more about--"**

Using probing statements such as "Tell me more about that" or "Can you share more of your thinking about that" is a way to make sure you understand the message, and to seek greater clarification and check inferences.

To fully **LISTEN**, you must cultivate a mindset of curiosity and adopt an approach of genuine inquiry. Responding without judgment is also a key skill in effective listening. By asking open-ended questions and probing questions you enable the person to share the relevant information they have regarding the situation, and to help them feel valued and understood.

LADDER OF INFERENCE



Test Assumptions and Check Inferences

What is an Inference?

An inference is a conclusion or deduction based on something known or assumed. An inference is therefore your assumption about someone's behavior rather than a description of the behavior itself.

Inferences are the meaning we attribute to observable data; they are conclusions we reach based on known information. Sometimes inferences are helpful, particularly when they are correct. For instance, a mental health professional infers that a patient is acting abnormally and, therefore decides to take extra precautions, or to commit the individual for further examination and treatment. Other times inferences are destructive, particularly when they are wrong. For example, a supervisor assumes that she cannot discuss *any* problems with her boss, because the last time she did her boss got upset.

Accurate or inaccurate, everyone makes inferences; as human beings we make them as naturally as we breathe. Nevertheless, supervisors can learn to be effective by being aware of how they make inferences and by learning to check them out.

The following example demonstrates how we make inferences. Suppose that Diane is a supervisor of her work unit and generally all 5 of her direct reports keep their office doors open while working to enable easy conversation. Tom has shut his office door the last two mornings when Diane was walking down the hall toward his office. Diane observes the behavior - Tom shutting his door as she was coming toward his office. She then begins making negative inferences as described below.

HOW WE MAKE INFERENCES

DIANE'S ACTUAL OBSERVATIONS/INFERENCES	CHARACTERIZATION OF OBSERVATIONS/INFERENCES
Tom is a jerk who can't be trusted.	**High Level Inference** (Characterizing Tom as a person)
↑	↑
Tom is doing personal business on work time and hiding it from me.	**Medium Level Inference** (Characterizing Tom's motives)
↑	↑
Tom does not want to talk with me.	**Low Level Inference** (Characterizing Tom's actions)
↑	↑
The last 2 days, Tom closed the door as Diane walked toward his office to speak with him.	**Observable Behavior** (What Tom actually did)

Notice that the negative inferences that Diane makes place her into the Drama Triangle**.** Therefore, if Diane fails to check out her inferences with Tom, she will act on it (or adjust her behavior based on her assumption. For example, she might avoid Tom except when she has to deal with him. She may also complain about Tom behind his back. She may begin to micromanage Tom's work and fail to share critical information with Tom that she shares with other staff.

Quite likely Tom will observe Diane's behavior toward him. **Assuming he fails to check out his inferences with her, he will probably begin to make inferences about her behavior!** As a result, he may infer that she is a poor leader and cannot be trusted. As a result, his actions reflect his negative perceptions. He begins to avoid her, criticizes her behind her back, and fails to share critical information with her.

Pretty soon, Diane finds herself in a self-fulfilling prophecy. When she saw Tom close his office door when she walked toward it when she wanted to talk with him, she assumed she could not trust Tom, and now, her assumption is being confirmed - he acts mistrustfully toward her. **As a result, she assumes her original inference was accurate!** (Note also that Tom is doing the same thing; he is climbing the ladder of inference without checking them out. If either one of them would check out their inferences, they can break the cycle of this self-fulfilling prophesy.)

<u>How to Check Inferences</u>

The skill of checking inferences involves three steps.

Step #1: Describe the behavior that has led you to make the inference. This shares valid information with the other person so they can understand what behavior has led you to make the inference(s).

Step #2: Share the inference at the lowest level. *By sharing* lower level inferences (inferences about the behavior) the manager or supervisor stays out of the Persecutor role, is less likely to contribute to a defensive climate, and minimizes potential inaccuracies that can occur by jumping several levels of inferences. By sharing inferences at the highest level ("you are a jerk who cannot be trusted"), the manager will likely precipitate an angry defensive reaction.

Step #3: Ask for the other person's perspective. This allows you to go right to the source and validate or invalidate the inference.

<u>Illustration:</u>

Step #1:	Diane says, "Tom, I observed that you closed your door the last 2 days as I was walking towards your office to speak to you."
Step #2:	When that happened, I got the feeling that you did not want to speak with me and were telling me to stay away and that concerned me because I thought we had a good working relationship.
Step #3:	Would you share your views regarding my impressions?

Perhaps in response Tom would agree he did not want to speak with her and he may also offer a response to explain why he closed the door and what he was doing when she came by. He may say, "You are right, I closed the door because I am handling some personal issues since my mother is in hospice care and I have been very upset and do not want to talk with anyone." Obviously, such a response probably indicates Diane has made an inaccurate inference.

The term "probably" was used in the last sentence because there is no guarantee that Tom is being truthful. It is our experience that people will tend to be truthful when the skill of *Checking Inferences* is used. If Tom is not being truthful, Diane will likely observe other behaviors, such as a pattern of avoiding her at work, not being engaged in the work, criticism behind her back, or withholding information that would cause her to infer that Tom is not truthful. Once again, she can refer to those behaviors to check out her inferences further.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Inferences can be positive or negative. *In either case, they can be wrong and ineffective.* At first glance, it may seem that positive inferences avoid being ineffective, but they do not. For example, suppose that the police employee assumes that the suspect is merely reaching for a wallet, when in fact he is drawing a gun. Similarly, Diane may assume Tom is dealing with a personal issue because he has closed his door the last two days, but he is in fact using work time for personal business and does not want to let her know. Other staff members may also be observing the behavior and making the same inference Diane has made. By not checking out her positive inference, she assumes that Tom has a valid reason for closing his door when in fact he does not. Therefore, positive inferences should also be checked.

2. The skill of checking inferences highlights *how much influence we have over negative emotions.* Diane makes her own choices with respect to her inferences. If she chooses to hold on to her negative emotions toward Tom (and fail to check out her inference), she is responsible for her negative feelings - not Tom. To take responsibility for resolving her negative feelings, she should check out her inferences.

I-Messages
A useful tool for helping stay out of conflict

An “I-message” or “I-statement” allows you to take ownership for your feelings and beliefs and helps you communicate in a respectful manner that does not place blame on the other person.

I-messages are particularly useful when you are upset and want to express your feelings without escalating a conflict. They are also useful in giving performance feedback and work most effectively when paired with the skills of active listening and asking open-ended questions.

<u>I statement vs. You Statement</u>

Take for example the statement “you broke your promise.” This implies blame and may often be met with a defensive reaction. A more effective I-message such as, “I felt let down when you did not ask for my opinion because you told me last week you would ask for my input on the next project.”

I-messages are an effective tool for a supervisor to use when addressing performance or behavior that is not meeting standards. For example, “I am concerned that you have turned in your section of the monthly report late the last 3 months because it means that I am unable to complete the department’s report on time” is a more effective statement than “Your reports have been late recently.”

<u>I- Message Phrasing</u>

There are 3 types of information that should be included in the I-message when giving feedback:

1. A description of the behavior
2. The feeling (emotion) the behavior creates
3. The effect that behavior has

<u>Sample phrasing:</u>

I feel ________ *(name the feeling)* when________ *(describe behavior*) because __________*(describe impact).*

<u>Example 1</u>: “I was disappointed when I learned that you shared my personal information with Sarah because I had confided in you and asked you to keep the information to yourself.”

<u>Example 2:</u> “I am concerned that you have had 6 unplanned absences in the last two months. This means that other staff have to be called in to cover for you at the last minute.”

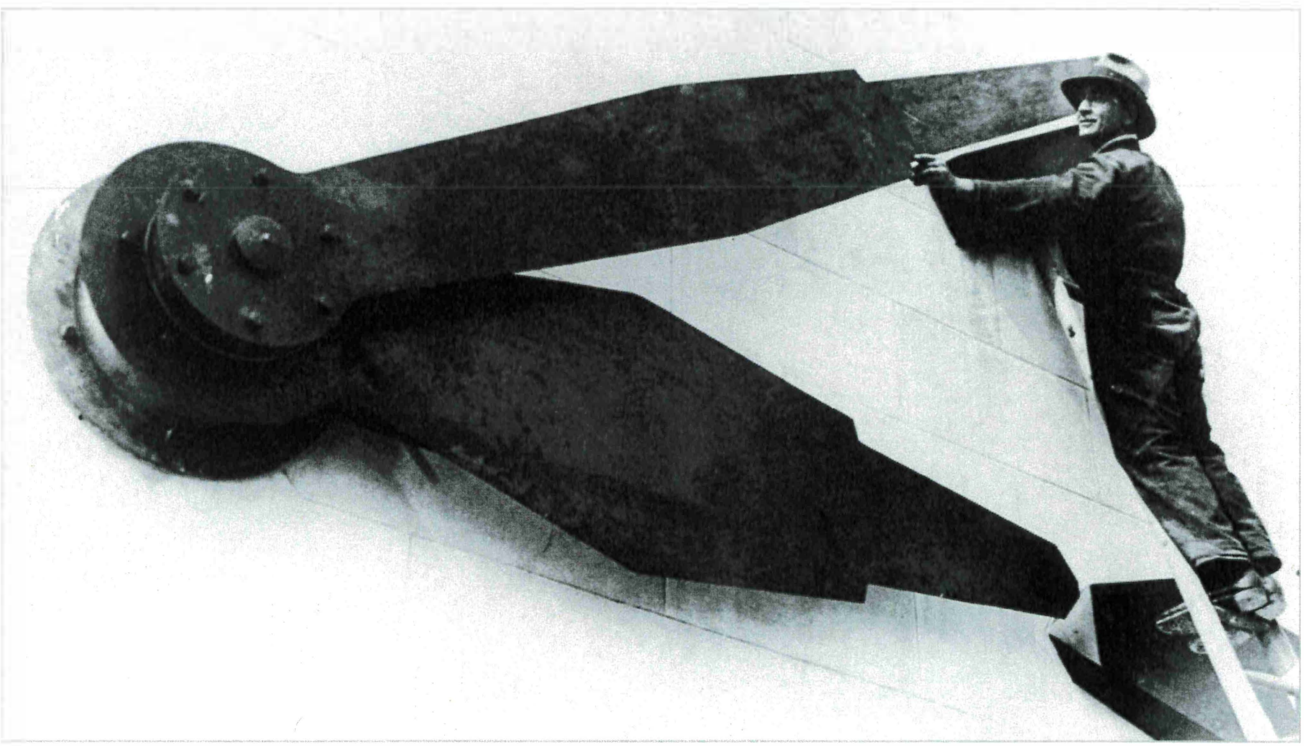
Harvard Business Review

DELEGATION

Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?

by William Oncken, Jr. and Donald L. Wass

FROM THE NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1999 ISSUE



Editor's Note: This article was originally published in the November–December 1974 issue of HBR and has been one of the publication's two best-selling reprints ever.

For its reissue as a Classic, the *Harvard Business Review* asked Stephen R. Covey to provide a commentary.

Why is it that managers are typically running out of time while their subordinates are typically running out of work? Here we shall explore the meaning of management time as it relates to the interaction between managers and their bosses, their peers, and their subordinates.

Specifically, we shall deal with three kinds of management time:

Boss-imposed time—used to accomplish those activities that the boss requires and that the manager cannot disregard without direct and swift penalty.

System-imposed time—used to accommodate requests from peers for active support. Neglecting these requests will also result in penalties, though not always as direct or swift.

Self-imposed time—used to do those things that the manager originates or agrees to do. A certain portion of this kind of time, however, will be taken by subordinates and is called *subordinate-imposed time*. The remaining portion will be the manager's own and is called *discretionary time*. Self-imposed time is not subject to penalty since neither the boss nor the system can discipline the manager for not doing what they didn't know he had intended to do in the first place.

To accommodate those demands, managers need to control the timing and the content of what they do. Since what their bosses and the system impose on them are subject to penalty, managers cannot tamper with those requirements. Thus their self-imposed time becomes their major area of concern.

Managers should try to increase the discretionary component of their self-imposed time by minimizing or doing away with the subordinate component. They will then use the added increment to get better control over their boss-imposed and system-imposed activities. Most managers spend much more time dealing with subordinates' problems than they even faintly realize. Hence we shall use the monkey-on-the-back metaphor to examine how subordinate-imposed time comes into being and what the superior can do about it.

Where Is the Monkey?

Let us imagine that a manager is walking down the hall and that he notices one of his subordinates, Jones, coming his way. When the two meet, Jones greets the manager with, "Good morning. By the way, we've got a problem. You see…." As Jones continues, the manager recognizes in this problem the two characteristics common to all the problems his subordinates gratuitously bring to his attention. Namely, the manager knows (a) enough to get involved, but (b) not enough to make the on-the-spot decision expected of him. Eventually, the manager says, "So glad you brought this up. I'm in a rush right now. Meanwhile, let me think about it, and I'll let you know." Then he and Jones part company.

Let us analyze what just happened. Before the two of them met, on whose back was the "monkey"? The subordinate's. After they parted, on whose back was it? The manager's. Subordinate-imposed time begins the moment a monkey successfully leaps from the back of a subordinate to the back of his or her superior and does not end until the monkey is returned to its proper owner for care and feeding. In accepting the monkey, the manager has voluntarily assumed a position subordinate to his subordinate. That is, he has allowed Jones to make him her subordinate by doing two things a subordinate is generally expected to do for a boss—the manager has accepted a responsibility from his subordinate, and the manager has promised her a progress report.

The subordinate, to make sure the manager does not miss this point, will later stick her head in the manager's office and cheerily query, "How's it coming?" (This is called supervision.)

Or let us imagine in concluding a conference with Johnson, another subordinate, the manager's parting words are, "Fine. Send me a memo on that."

Let us analyze this one. The monkey is now on the subordinate's back because the next move is his, but it is poised for a leap. Watch that monkey. Johnson dutifully writes the requested memo and drops it in his out-basket. Shortly thereafter, the manager plucks it from his in-basket and reads it. Whose move is it now? The manager's. If he does not make that move soon, he will get a follow-up memo from the subordinate. (This is another form of supervision.) The longer the manager delays, the more frustrated the subordinate will become (he'll be spinning his wheels) and the more guilty the manager will feel (his backlog of subordinate-imposed time will be mounting).

Or suppose once again that at a meeting with a third subordinate, Smith, the manager agrees to provide all the necessary backing for a public relations proposal he has just asked Smith to develop. The manager's parting words to her are, "Just let me know how I can help."

Now let us analyze this. Again the monkey is initially on the subordinate's back. But for how long? Smith realizes that she cannot let the manager "know" until her proposal has the manager's approval. And from experience, she also realizes that her proposal will likely be sitting in the manager's briefcase for weeks before he eventually gets to it. Who's really got the monkey? Who will be checking up on whom? Wheel spinning and bottlenecking are well on their way again.

A fourth subordinate, Reed, has just been transferred from another part of the company so that he can launch and eventually manage a newly created business venture. The manager has said they should get together soon to hammer out a set of objectives for the new job, adding, "I will draw up an initial draft for discussion with you."

Let us analyze this one, too. The subordinate has the new job (by formal assignment) and the full responsibility (by formal delegation), but the manager has the next move. Until he makes it, he will have the monkey, and the subordinate will be immobilized.

Why does all of this happen? Because in each instance the manager and the subordinate assume at the outset, wittingly or unwittingly, that the matter under consideration is a joint problem. The monkey in each case begins its career astride both their backs. All it has to do is move the wrong leg, and—presto!—the subordinate deftly disappears. The manager is thus left with another acquisition for his menagerie. Of course, monkeys can be trained not to move the wrong leg. But it is easier to prevent them from straddling backs in the first place.

Who Is Working for Whom?

Let us suppose that these same four subordinates are so thoughtful and considerate of their superior's time that they take pains to allow no more than three monkeys to leap from each of their backs to his in any one day. In a five-day week, the manager will have picked up 60 screaming monkeys—far too many to do anything about them individually. So he spends his subordinate-imposed time juggling his "priorities."

Late Friday afternoon, the manager is in his office with the door closed for privacy so he can contemplate the situation, while his subordinates are waiting outside to get their last chance before the weekend to remind him that he will have to "fish or cut bait." Imagine what they are saying to one another about the manager as they wait: "What a bottleneck. He just can't make up his mind. How anyone ever got that high up in our company without being able to make a decision we'll never know."

Worst of all, the reason the manager cannot make any of these "next moves" is that his time is almost entirely eaten up by meeting his own boss-imposed and system-imposed requirements. To control those tasks, he needs discretionary time that is in turn denied him when he is preoccupied with all these monkeys. The manager is caught in a vicious circle. But time is a-wasting (an understatement).

The manager calls his secretary on the intercom and instructs her to tell his subordinates that he won't be able to see them until Monday morning. At 7 pm, he drives home, intending with firm resolve to return to the office tomorrow to get caught up over the weekend. He returns bright and early the next day only to see, on the nearest green of the golf course across from his office window, a foursome. Guess who?

That does it. He now knows who is really working for whom. Moreover, he now sees that if he actually accomplishes during this weekend what he came to accomplish, his subordinates' morale will go up so sharply that they will each raise the limit on the number of monkeys they will let jump from their backs to his. In short, he now sees, with the clarity of a revelation on a mountaintop, that the more he gets caught up, the more he will fall behind.

The manager can now see, with the clarity of a revelation on a mountaintop, that the more he gets caught up, the more he will fall behind.

He leaves the office with the speed of a person running away from a plague. His plan? To get caught up on something else he hasn't had time for in years: a weekend with his family. (This is one of the many varieties of discretionary time.)

Sunday night he enjoys ten hours of sweet, untroubled slumber, because he has clear-cut plans for Monday. He is going to get rid of his subordinate-imposed time. In exchange, he will get an equal amount of discretionary time, part of which he will spend with his subordinates to make sure that they learn the difficult but rewarding managerial art called "The Care and Feeding of Monkeys."

The manager will also have plenty of discretionary time left over for getting control of the timing and the content not only of his boss-imposed time but also of his system-imposed time. It may take months, but compared with the way things have been, the rewards will be enormous. His ultimate objective is to manage his time.

Getting Rid of the Monkeys

The manager returns to the office Monday morning just late enough so that his four subordinates have collected outside his office waiting to see him about their monkeys. He calls them in one by one. The purpose of each interview is to take a monkey, place it on the desk between them, and figure out together how the next move might conceivably be the subordinate's. For certain monkeys, that will take some doing. The subordinate's next move may be so elusive that the manager may decide—just for now—merely to let the monkey sleep on the subordinate's back overnight and have him or her return with it at an appointed time the next morning to continue the joint quest for a more substantive move by the subordinate. (Monkeys sleep just as soundly overnight on subordinates' backs as they do on superiors'.)

As each subordinate leaves the office, the manager is rewarded by the sight of a monkey leaving his office on the subordinate's back. For the next 24 hours, the subordinate will not be waiting for the manager; instead, the manager will be waiting for the subordinate.

Later, as if to remind himself that there is no law against his engaging in a constructive exercise in the interim, the manager strolls by the subordinate's office, sticks his head in the door, and cheerily asks, "How's it coming?" (The time consumed in doing this is discretionary for the manager and boss imposed for the subordinate.)

> In accepting the monkey, the manager has voluntarily assumed a position subordinate to his subordinate.

When the subordinate (with the monkey on his or her back) and the manager meet at the appointed hour the next day, the manager explains the ground rules in words to this effect:

"At no time while I am helping you with this or any other problem will your problem become my problem. The instant your problem becomes mine, you no longer have a problem. I cannot help a person who hasn't got a problem.

"When this meeting is over, the problem will leave this office exactly the way it came in—on your back. You may ask my help at any appointed time, and we will make a joint determination of what the next move will be and which of us will make it.

"In those rare instances where the next move turns out to be mine, you and I will determine it together. I will not make any move alone."

The manager follows this same line of thought with each subordinate until about 11 am, when he realizes that he doesn't have to close his door. His monkeys are gone. They will return—but by appointment only. His calendar will assure this.

Transferring the Initiative

What we have been driving at in this monkey-on-the-back analogy is that managers can transfer initiative back to their subordinates and keep it there. We have tried to highlight a truism as obvious as it is subtle: namely, before developing initiative in subordinates, the manager must see to it that they *have* the initiative. Once the manager takes it back, he will no longer have it and he can kiss his discretionary time good-bye. It will all revert to subordinate-imposed time.

Nor can the manager and the subordinate effectively have the same initiative at the same time. The opener, "Boss, we've got a problem," implies this duality and represents, as noted earlier, a monkey astride two backs, which is a very bad way to start a monkey on its career. Let us, therefore, take a few moments to examine what we call "The Anatomy of Managerial Initiative."

There are five degrees of initiative that the manager can exercise in relation to the boss and to the system:

1. wait until told (lowest initiative);

2. ask what to do;

3. recommend, then take resulting action;

4. act, but advise at once;

5. and act on own, then routinely report (highest initiative).

Clearly, the manager should be professional enough not to indulge in initiatives 1 and 2 in relation either to the boss or to the system. A manager who uses initiative 1 has no control over either the timing or the content of boss-imposed or system-imposed time and thereby forfeits any right to complain about what he or she is told to do or when. The manager who uses initiative 2 has control over the timing but not over the content. Initiatives 3, 4, and 5 leave the manager in control of both, with the greatest amount of control being exercised at level 5.

In relation to subordinates, the manager's job is twofold. First, to outlaw the use of initiatives 1 and 2, thus giving subordinates no choice but to

A few deceptively simple changes can make an executive team more efficient and effective.

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learn and master "Completed Staff Work." Second, to see that for each problem leaving his or her office there is an agreed-upon level of initiative assigned to it, in addition to an agreed-upon time and place for the next manager-subordinate conference. The latter should be duly noted on the manager's calendar.

The Care and Feeding of Monkeys

To further clarify our analogy between the monkey on the back and the processes of assigning and controlling, we shall refer briefly to the manager's appointment schedule, which calls for five hard-and-fast rules governing the "Care and Feeding of Monkeys." (Violation of these rules will cost discretionary time.)

Rule 1.

Monkeys should be fed or shot. Otherwise, they will starve to death, and the manager will waste valuable time on postmortems or attempted resurrections.

Rule 2.

The monkey population should be kept below the maximum number the manager has time to feed. Subordinates will find time to work as many monkeys as he or she finds time to feed, but no more. It shouldn't take more than five to 15 minutes to feed a properly maintained monkey.

Rule 3.

Monkeys should be fed by appointment only. The manager should not have to hunt down starving monkeys and feed them on a catch-as-catch-can basis.

Rule 4.

Monkeys should be fed face-to-face or by telephone, but never by mail. (Remember—with mail, the next move will be the manager's.) Documentation may add to the feeding process, but it cannot take the place of feeding.

Rule 5.

Every monkey should have an assigned next feeding time and degree of initiative. These may be revised at any time by mutual consent but never allowed to become vague or indefinite. Otherwise, the monkey will either starve to death or wind up on the manager's back.

Making Time for Gorillas

by Stephen R. Covey

When Bill Oncken wrote this article in 1974, managers were in a terrible bind. They were desperate for a way to free up their time, but command and control was the status quo. Managers felt they weren't allowed to empower their subordinates to make decisions. Too dangerous. Too risky. That's why Oncken's message—give the monkey back to its rightful owner—involved a critically important paradigm shift. Many managers working today owe him a debt of gratitude.

It is something of an understatement, however, to observe that much has changed since Oncken's radical recommendation. Command and control as a management philosophy is all but dead, and "empowerment" is the word of the day in most organizations trying to thrive in global, intensely competitive markets. But command and control stubbornly remains a

"Get control over the timing and content of what you do" is appropriate advice for managing time. The first order of business is for the manager to enlarge his or her discretionary time by eliminating subordinate-imposed time. The second is for the manager to use a portion of this newfound discretionary time to see to it that each subordinate actually has the initiative and applies it. The third is for the manager to use another portion of the increased discretionary time to get and keep control of the timing and content of both boss-imposed and system-imposed time. All these steps will increase the manager's leverage and enable the value of each hour spent in managing management time to multiply without theoretical limit.

A version of this article appeared in the November –December 1999 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

common practice. Management thinkers and executives have discovered in the last decade that bosses cannot just give a monkey back to their subordinates and then merrily get on with their own business. Empowering subordinates is hard and complicated work.

The reason: when you give problems back to subordinates to solve themselves, you have to be sure that they have both the desire and the ability to do so. As every executive knows, that isn't always the case. Enter a whole new set of problems. Empowerment often means you have to develop people, which is initially much more time consuming than solving the problem on your own.

Just as important, empowerment can only thrive when the whole organization buys into it—when formal systems and the informal culture support it. Managers need to be rewarded for delegating decisions and developing people. Otherwise, the degree of real empowerment in an organization will vary according to the beliefs and practices of individual managers.

But perhaps the most important lesson about empowerment is that effective delegation—the kind Oncken advocated—depends on a trusting relationship between a manager and his subordinate. Oncken's message may have been ahead of his time, but what he suggested was still a fairly dictatorial solution. He basically told bosses, "Give the problem back!" Today, we know that this approach by itself is too authoritarian. To delegate effectively, executives need to establish a running dialogue with subordinates. They need to establish a partnership. After all, if subordinates are afraid of failing in front of their boss, they'll keep coming back for help rather than truly take initiative.

Oncken's article also doesn't address an aspect of delegation that has greatly interested me during the past two decades—that many managers are actually *eager* to take on their subordinates' monkeys. Nearly all the managers I talk with agree that their people are underutilized in their present jobs. But even some of the most successful, seemingly self-assured executives have talked about how hard it is to give up control to their subordinates.

I've come to attribute that eagerness for control to a common, deep-seated belief that rewards in life are scarce and fragile. Whether they learn it from their family, school, or athletics, many people establish an identity by comparing themselves with others. When they see others gain power, information, money, or recognition, for instance, they experience what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called "a feeling of deficiency"—a sense that something is being taken from them. That makes it hard for them to be genuinely happy about the success of others—even of their loved ones. Oncken implies that managers can easily give back or refuse monkeys, but many managers may subconsciously fear that a subordinate taking the initiative will make them appear a little less strong and a little more vulnerable.

How, then, do managers develop the inward security, the mentality of "abundance," that would enable them to relinquish control and seek the growth and development of those around them? The work I've done with numerous organizations suggests that managers who live with integrity according to a principle-based value system are most likely to sustain an empowering style of leadership.

Given the times in which he wrote, it was no wonder that Oncken's message resonated with managers. But it was reinforced by Oncken's wonderful gift for storytelling. I got to know Oncken on the speaker's circuit in the 1970s, and I was always impressed by how he dramatized his ideas in colorful detail. Like the Dilbert comic strip, Oncken had a tongue-in-cheek style that got to the core of managers' frustrations and made them want to take back control of their time. And the monkey on your back wasn't just a metaphor for Oncken—it was his personal symbol. I saw him several times walking through airports with a stuffed monkey on his shoulder.

I'm not surprised that his article is one of the two best-selling HBR articles ever. Even with all we know about empowerment, its vivid message is even more important and relevant now than it was 25 years ago. Indeed, Oncken's insight is a basis for my own work on time management, in which I have people categorize their activities according to urgency and importance. I've heard from executives again and again that half or more of their time is spent on matters that are urgent but not important. They're trapped in an endless cycle of dealing with other people's monkeys, yet they're reluctant to help those people take their own initiative. As a result, they're often too busy to spend the time they need on the real gorillas in their organization. Oncken's article remains a powerful wake-up call for managers who need to delegate effectively.

William Oncken, Jr., was chairman of the William Oncken Corporation until his death in 1988. His son, William Oncken III, now heads the company.

Donald L. Wass was president of the William Oncken Company of Texas when the article first appeared. He now heads the Dallas–Fort Worth region of The Executive Committee (TEC), an international organization for presidents and CEOs.