

Glenn Campbell's
Philosophy Notes

FamilyCourtGuy@gmail.com

© Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173

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Monograph no.108

March 21, 2008

Management

Management is the art of compromise under fire. Whether you are managing a baseball team, a company, a family or your own finances, you are trying to balance the demands of many competing forces, each of whom are not eager for compromise and would eat you for lunch if they could.

It is fine to be able to do one thing well, but in management you are trying to do many things all at once, and doing them “well enough” is the most you can hope for. No matter what a manager does, someone will be unhappy and some needs are going to go unmet. Management isn't the place for perfectionists, because perfect is never going to happen. It's the place for creative pragmatists.

If you are running a company, then you might have to balance the needs of unions, customers, regulators, suppliers and shareholders. If you make the unions unhappy, they might go on strike, and if you make the shareholders unhappy, you might lose your job. In the end, you have to keep everybody happy enough to move the whole operation toward its goals.

Management is different from leadership, which is the ability to inspire and direct other people. Management is more of a cognitive skill: the ability to balance competing interests under pressure.

Think of a general overseeing a battle. He may be a natural leader, capable of inspiring his troops and rallying them to the cause, but he

could also be a great strategist, sequestered in his war room, deciding when to strike the enemy and when to retreat. It is this strategy component that constitutes management.

All managers are dealing with the same sort of operating environment. There are demands coming at them from the outside, and there are resources at their disposal with which they can address those demands. Both of these factors may be largely beyond their control. Almost always, the demands far outstrip the available resources, so the essential problem of management is how to apply those limited resources to best advantage.

If you are managing your money, you rarely have as much of it as you think you need, so you have to make compromises. You may have to address the most important problem, like paying the mortgage, and intentionally neglect or defer a less important one, like buying clothes.

The hardest part of management is the latter—the decision to withhold resources from something worthy. In battle, a military commander may have to abandon some of his soldiers in order to save the bulk of his forces. That's a horrible decision to have to make, but someone has to do it.

Most people are not suited for management because they are not prepared to make these painful sacrifices. The worst kind of manager is highly emotional and can't see beyond the feelings of the moment.

He cares too much about whoever is in front of him crying for help. He'll save those soldiers but lose the war.

Better managers are more detached and surgical. You wouldn't want a heart surgeon who cried, “Oh my God, blood!” as soon as he made the first incision. A good surgeon has the fortitude to keep cutting, knowing strategically that he is doing the right thing even when others turn away.

Management, by its nature, must be secretive, because most people are not prepared to see the blood. If a commander must sacrifice some of his troops, obviously those soldiers and their families are going to protest. If they had the chance, they'd do anything to stop the process.

To reach the best conclusion, managers have to be able to think the unthinkable and discuss it in confidence with their colleagues. Even in democratic government, there has to be a limit to public involvement in the decision-making process, because the emotions of individual needs can easily distract from global needs.

By necessity, management requires some aloofness and authority. A general can't spend too much time in the trenches with the troops, getting to know their needs and feelings. If he did, he'd be swamped with special requests, and he'd also be compromised when the time came to make hard decisions about those troops. Instead, a general stands apart, issues orders and expects those orders to be followed.

Inevitably, the manager is going to be both deified and vilified by the people he is ordering around. They'll see him as a god or a devil, not a person. They probably won't understand his reasoning, because they don't see the big picture like he does.

It would be nice if everyone's feelings were addressed, but success on the battlefield requires that orders be followed and things get done regardless of how people feel.

Glenn Campbell