

Are People Being Managed to Maximize Performance?

By: Voss W. Graham
InnerActive Consulting Group, Inc.

It seems like the entire business community is obsessed with terms like retention, productivity and optimization of assets – including human capital. Executives and managers are continually working on ways to handle these issues to insure that their organizations are fundamentally sound.

The interesting thing about all this discussion and interaction between executives and managers to uncover the best way to handle these seemingly complex issues is how simple some of the solutions are to implement. As we coach various executives and managers in corporate America, we hear about how certain managers or employees are struggling in their jobs, or how “so-n-so” just doesn’t seem to get it right to meet his or her objectives, or about how the “hot shot” from another company or division didn’t make it happen in their new position and was fired or quit.

As we heard more and more of these stories and began to dig into the situations, we found that certain basic management functions were not being handled correctly. It appears that few people know of or remember the concept of “Task Maturity Levels” and the corresponding management principles necessary for individual and managerial success.

The Task Maturity Level principle holds that everybody has found a level of competency relative to their job and specifically the ability to perform the duties of their position at any point in time. The ability to know their job and the processes involved within their job allows a ranking of a high, medium or low level of task maturity. The basic rule of thumb is that anyone taking a new position is automatically placed in the low task maturity level.

The low task maturity level means that the individual has not mastered the duties of the position. They are not aware of the different processes that are involved in their jobs, department, division or company. At this level, most people are not aware of the culture of the organization – functionally and politically. They are still finding their way to success and in some cases just how success is measured.

When an individual is in the low task maturity level, they need a “hands-on” or directive manager or high performing peer to coach them. This is a period that sets the expectations and standards of performance. It is a key period for an individual to become part of a team and engage the positive emotions of liking their bosses and peers (a key ingredient for success). There are two common mistakes made by managers that have a negative impact upon people who are new to a position. One is they don’t give the new person any challenging assignments and the person becomes bored or believes that the slow and boring pace is the job norm (low expectations). The second is an assumption that the person knows everything they need to know and turns the individual lose with no direction or guidance – if the person struggles, then the same manager labels this person as slow or incompetent! (Actually, the manager is incompetent for abandoning the employee.)

As an individual grows in their job knowledge, process knowledge and culture knowledge, they move into the Medium Task Maturity Level. Here they have a working knowledge of the job and can be very successful doing the routine or normal job. They are aware of political issues within the organization and they have a good idea as to who can get things done within deadlines, etc. They are moving into the conscious competency level of work. They can make a number of decisions that are directly related to their job – particularly the simple and routine.

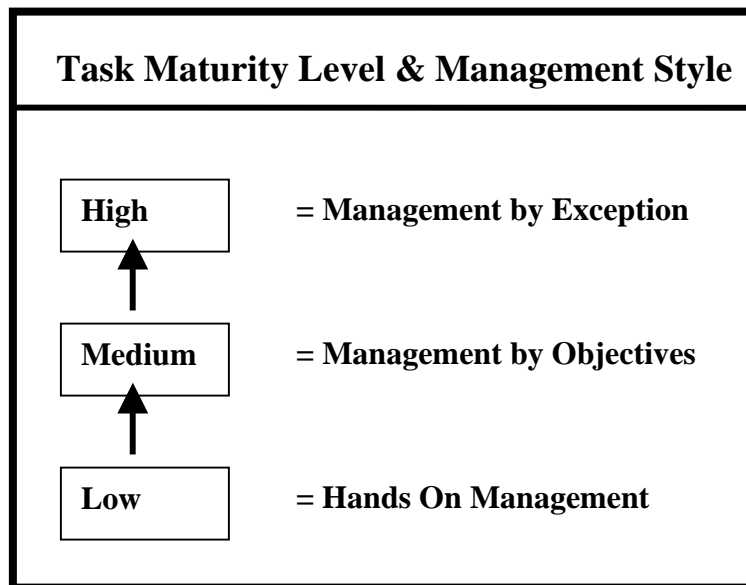
People that are in the medium task maturity level are best managed using Managing by Objectives or the Supportive management style. While the individual can usually do a “good to excellent” job, they still need focus and direction. The MBO style sets mutually agreed upon objectives for the individual and regular scheduled reviews of progress with their manager. This regular review allows for adjustments or refocusing activities of critical tasks insuring higher levels of performance and productivity. These reviews involve the individual in delivering objectives and accountable at the same time. Again, there are two common mistakes made by managers using the MBO process. The first is the manager sets the objectives without any involvement on the part of the individual. With no involvement there is less commitment on the part of the individual to accomplish the objective. (This is a major issue with Sales Teams.) The second mistake is the manager fails to follow-up with the regular scheduled review sessions. Therefore, if the individual is off target in their progress, they get no feedback until the end of the project or time period and have no time to adjust or correct. Again the label system is applied to the situation and a potential high performer is de-motivated due to a manager that does not work the system correctly.

Finally, an individual who puts in their time, learns everything they can about their company, their job, the culture and has experienced regular levels of high performance will move into the High task maturity level. At this level a person has shown total competence and is able to handle complex situations successfully. They have a reputation of being capable of handling any situation that comes their way and “get it done.” In truth, they need little supervision and prefer to do things their way.

People in the high task maturity level status need to be managed using Managing by Exception or MBE. Here the manager and individual only meet to discuss two things. First to define are the goals or expectations for the individual. The second occasion is if there is a problem or issue whereby the individual needs the assistance of the manager to finish or execute a plan. In other words, the manager only gets involved with the high performer when there is an exception or variance from the norm that needs to be discussed or resolved.

Organizations have a tendency to promote these people into new positions and expect them to immediately fit into the same High task maturity level. Since the new job has different tasks, activities and competencies – many times these people fail or do not meet the new expectations placed upon them by others. This explains why excellent technical or sales people who are placed in management positions with no management training or coaching tend to fail at much higher rates than expected. The Rule of Thumb is when people move into a new job or position (no matter what the level of position) they should be placed in the low task maturity level with some hands-on attention.

One of the keys to success for organizations is to review their understanding and use of the Task Level Maturity process. Do you have an orientation process for new people – both general information and job specific information? Are there systems in place that reward and support coaching at all levels? Are there regular review systems for both MBO's and performance review assessments that involve manager and employee? Finally, are your fast trackers identified and monitored regularly to insure that they are challenged to achieve at high levels and expectations?



*Written by Voss W. Graham, Senior Business Advisor for **InnerActive Consulting Group, Inc.***

*For more information about Voss Graham and the services the **InnerActive Consulting Group** has to offer, please call 901.757.4434 or email Voss at voss@inneractiveconsulting.com.*

*Also, visit **InnerActive Consulting Group's** website at www.inneractiveconsulting.com*