

Chapter 18

The Critical Five People Practices of IT Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The key to an effective IT organization is to hire good people and nurture them. While recognizing that individual people require individual considerations, the five important management practices elaborated in this chapter are fundamental. They are to provide employees (1) interesting and challenging work, (2) the freedom to do it their way, (3) things they can own, (4) an environment in which they can excel, and (5) recognition for their efforts and accomplishments.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to getting the most from IT people, experience has taught me that there are only a handful of people practices that really matter. They seem to apply regardless of age, level within the organization, gender, or ethnicity. Embed these critical practices in a solid, overall approach to managing people, and you'll have a process that will generate success. But if you don't employ the Critical Five, nothing else you try will be very effective.

It wasn't academic research or a double-blind study that led me to these beliefs, although there is certainly research to support my opinion. Instead, these views were generated from a career spent managing IT people—from infrastructure to development to emerging technologies to major projects to budgeting, purchasing, planning and strategy—a career that's shown me what motivates people. What makes them work their hearts out? What makes them proud? What makes them loyal? What makes them stay?

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THE CRITICAL FIVE

More than anything else, people want to feel needed and to have their work appreciated. Scholars such as Maslow, Alderfer, Wahba, Mitchell, Mellor and others have debated this subject extensively, so I won't repeat those arguments here. Instead, I'll focus on the techniques you can use to fulfill these needs. But, first, let's identify the Critical Five practices that I've found to be so important.

The Critical Five are simple. Just give your people:

1. Interesting and challenging work
2. The freedom to do it their way
3. Things they can "own"
4. An environment in which they can excel
5. Recognition for their efforts and accomplishments

And watch them excel.

AN OVERALL APPROACH

While I've found the Critical Five to be required in unleashing talent, I believe they must be surrounded by three other practices to maximize your success in building and developing a successful IT team. This overall approach is also simple:

- A. Hire good people
- B. Nurture and develop them
- C. Unleash their talent (**The Critical Five**)
- D. Take pride in their accomplishments

Now let's explore this overall approach and the critical five practices in more detail.

A. Hire Good People

Every company or team has a specific culture, common practices and core competencies. You want employees with the kind of mind-set, thought-

processes, skills, and abilities that will enable them to thrive in that culture. We often refer to this as how people "fit" within an organization.

But while you may look for certain specific characteristics, abilities, and knowledge in your prospective hires, maybe even test for them, finding people who will "fit" is, at best, an imprecise science. I believe it's best to forget about "fit" at first and instead find excellent performers that you can then help "fit" in a way that will maximize their contribution.

So how do you recognize the people who are, or will become, excellent performers? I've discovered that there are key attributes such people have and these are the ones I look for.

The Attributes of Excellent Performers

I've always found that the best performers have an innate intellectual curiosity—a desire to understand why things work or are done a certain way. They also feel a need to improve them. And they're driven to always be learning new things. Just as importantly, they will learn from their experiences and apply those lessons to improving themselves. They have confidence and a sense of purpose. They have a positive attitude and are grounded ethically. They have a sense of humor and are willing to laugh at themselves. And they communicate well.

The good news is that you can search for these attributes in an interview. Ask prospective hires how they would tackle (or have tackled) a project involving unfamiliar technologies or processes. How curious were they about discovering how things worked and what could be improved? Ask what they learned from their experience. Can they generalize those lessons into improvements in their approach? Observe their confidence in answering your questions. Listen to how well they communicate facts and ideas. Do they accentuate the positive or dwell on the negative as they explain how they tackled certain projects or enumerate what's important to them?

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